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*by Thomas N. Scortia*

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*by Harlan Ellison*



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# SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 1 No. 5

AUGUST, 1957

## 3 Complete New Novels by Top Writers!

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#### **THIS WORLD MUST DIE! . . . . . Ivar Jorgenson 5**

The Earth Central computer said that Loy Gardner was the one man who could blast Lurian to dust. But the computer had been wrong once, and Gardner wondered...

#### **ALIEN NIGHT . . . . . Thomas N. Scortia 43**

Kenneth Huber had a slight and bitter choice: death in five years or death immediately. Then the three alien spaceships gave death an entirely new meaning!

#### **FORBIDDEN CARGO . . . . . Harlan Ellison 93**

Fargo Jeffers hated war, and didn't relish the job of ferrying hundreds of war-torn corpses back to Earth—that is, until a hidden enemy tried to stop him!

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## THE EDITOR'S SPACE

**T**HE TRUE HEROES of tomorrow, the futuristic pioneers who blaze trails through space to the stars, will have to be strong men indeed, full of the same dauntless courage as the pioneers who opened up and explored the New World of the Western hemisphere in the golden days of the past. . . .

Sound familiar? It should.

Superficially, that sentence may appear to be merely a rather flowery presentation of one of the basic principles of science fiction. But it never hurts to re-examine our basic principles.

So: man will reach the planets; there can't be much doubt of that. Chances are he'll reach the stars themselves eventually, although the job is on a fantastically larger scale and some pretty immense problems will have to be solved.


But what kind of men will the first space pioneers—and the explorers, fighters, traders

and others who will inevitably follow them—be?

One thing is sure: they won't be simple, rugged men with one-track minds.

The heroes of space will have to be highly trained to be able to get spaceships off the ground at all, let alone use the highly complex equipment they'll carry. And they'll have difficult decisions, based on huge numbers of highly complex factors, to make in dealing with any aliens they meet.

Science fiction stories, to be convincing, must take these factors into account. I think you'll find that the stories in this issue of SFA do so very nicely. The heroes are strong men, yes, but they're also intelligent men—and they face some mighty difficult decisions. Read the stories and see if you can decide whether you would have taken the same actions, under the same circumstances! It may not be easy!—LTS



Illustrated by Emsb

# This World Must Die!

by Ivar Jorgenson

*The computer said*

*Gardner was the man  
to blast Lurion to dust—  
but the computer had  
been wrong once...*



# This World Must Die!

by Ivar Jorgenson

## CHAPTER I

**K**ARNES didn't look much like the sort of man who could order the death of a planet, Loy Gardner thought. He didn't seem to have the necessary hardness, despite the precise angularity of his face. But you could never tell about people, it seemed.

Karnes didn't have to do the job himself. Gardner would take care of that. But it was Karnes' decision, and that was the most awful part of the job.

"In sixty-seven years, plus or minus eight months,"

---

*IVAR JORGENSEN was born in the little fishing village of Haugesund, Norway, and grew up with an inherent love of the sea. He was brought to the United States when he was eight years old, but has done considerable travelling since then, and wrote his first published story while on shipboard. He writes in the classic tradition of adventure science fiction, and This World Must Die! is one of his best.*

Karnes said, tapping the sheet of computations, "Lurion will launch an all-out war against the Solar System. During this war, Earth will be totally destroyed."

Gardner held himself in check. "Nice. If the machine's telling the truth about this, that is."

"Truth? Truth's a concept that exists only for past time. This hasn't happened yet. The computer says it *will* happen—if we allow it. Care to take the chance?"

"Oh," Gardner said softly. He leaned back in the firm webchair, watching Karnes very carefully. Around him, the computer system of Earth Central clicked and murmured. A bright bank of cryotronic tubes glared at him from the wall. Gardner crossed one uniformed leg over the other, and waited. It didn't take a million-cryotron calculator to guess what Karnes was aiming at, but Gardner had long since learned to let Earth's Chief of Security do things in his own way.

Karnes rubbed his cheek-

bones, a gesture that accented his angularity. He said, "There are three billion people living on Lurion."

"There are six billion on Earth," Gardner countered.

Karnes smiled coldly. "Ah—yes. Among Lurion's three billion are some who will be the parents of those who will aid in Earth's destruction, sixty-seven years from now. Unless, of course, we prevent that."

Sweat started to roll down Gardner's face. "Prevent? How?"

"By destroying Lurion, of course."

Gardner had seen it coming for more than a minute, but still it rocked him. He said, "And suppose the computer is wrong?"

Karnes shrugged. "Worlds have died unjustly before. A minor readjustment in a solar furnace's metabolism, a flare of energy, and a totally innocent world dies."

"Of novas, yes. Natural causes. But this is different. It's murder, isn't it?"

"In self-defense, before the fact. But you're forcing me to rationalize, Loy, and that's bad. Let me make it clear: *we will never know* if the computer was wrong. Therefore, we'll have to assume for the sake of our own souls that

it was right. Lurion must be destroyed, else Earth will be. I don't think you're the man for the job. The computer does, though."

Coming so quickly, the snapper nearly threw Gardner. "Sir?"

"I didn't think you could handle it," Karnes said. "But I fed your tape through the machine. The machine says you're the best man we have. I defer to its judgment."

"All right," Gardner said hoarsely. He examined himself, wondering if he could swing the job. He decided the computer was right, and Karnes wrong.

*God help me*, he thought. Out loud he said, glowering down at the Security Chief, "How's it going to be done, and when do I leave?"

"You'll be in charge of a team of five," Karnes said. "Come with me."

**L**URION was the fourth (and only inhabited) world of the Betelgeuse system, a smallish planet swinging on a somewhat eccentric orbit half a billion miles from its brilliant sun. Gardner came out of warp-drive a few million miles outside Lurion's atmosphere, shifted to ion-drive, and coasted down.

It was important that the landing be a good one. His ship was slated to be the get-away craft after the job was done. The other members of his team were under instructions to abandon their ships wherever they landed.

Calmly, now, Gardner went over the plan in his mind, reviewed the names of his team members, re-examined the thumbnail sketches of each that Karnes had given him. He had never met any of them. He wasn't convinced of the wisdom of that part of the operation, but there was no use questioning Security decisions.

On his wrist, the little indicator band was quiescent. Each of its five colored panels lay dull, unlit. When all five panels were lit, Lurion was doomed.

One of the panels—the white one—would light the moment Gardner touched Lurion's surface. That was his own color, as leader of the team.

A moment after landing, the red panel would flare into brightness. The red was for Jolland Smee, the lone survivor of the first Terran attempt to destroy Lurion.

It was only hours after Gardner had agreed to take the assignment that Karnes

had revealed there had already been one attempt at the job. A five-man team had been sent six months before. Only three of its members had managed to reach Lurion alive. One had been waylaid by thieves before he could get out of the System, while a second miscalculated his orbit and rode his warship square into Betelgeuse.

The three who *had* made the trip hadn't done too well either. Davis, the leader of the group, had unexpectedly developed an addiction to sour-sweet Lurioni *khall*, a vegetable-mash wine. A second man had contracted a Lurioni disease and had died (or was murdered) in a hospital. The survivor, Jolland Smee, had established himself comfortably, and was waiting for replacements. He couldn't do the job alone.

The fate of Davis interested Gardner. Why, he wondered, should a sober, serious-minded Security man abruptly turn into a wino the moment he made planetfall?

It took five coordinates to set up the resonating circuit that would destroy Lurion. One man—Smee—was there already, his transmitter ready to link forces with others. One more—Gardner—was on his way.



Gradually, the other three would arrive. Gardner thought about them as he jockeyed his ship through Lurion's turbulent thick atmosphere.

Deever Weegan was slated to be the first of the three. Gardner had seen Weegan's photo and file. He was a hard-eyed, fleshless man of stoic reserve and forbearance. His color on the indicator band was green.

Kully Leopold would be next. Leopold was a round-faced, round-eyed little man with a short stiff beard and twinkling eyes. He was the sort of deceptively mild person they saved for the most ruthless of missions. His color was blue.

Damon Archer completed the quintet. Yellow was his color on the indicator, but his color as a person was a sort of bland gray, Gardner thought. Archer showed no outstanding characteristics, no peaks on the graph at all. Well, Gardner reflected, Karnes probably knows what he's doing—or else the computer does. Archer probably had an over-all competence that made up for his lack of specialties.

That made five. Gardner wondered whether this mission would meet the fate of its predecessor.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Well, they had sixty-seven years to get the job done. If the computer were right, Gardner thought.

If.

**H**E PULLED OUT of a dizzying landing-spin, got the ship pointing in the right direction at the right moment, shifted over to automatic, and let the cyber brain bring him down on the button. At the moment of landing, the indicator on his wrist flashed white. A second later—as soon as Jolland Smee was able to signal contact—the red panel lit.

*So far, so good,* Gardner thought.

He had landed on a broad brown dirt apron at the edge of a bustling spacefield. The field was bright in the yellowish-red sunlight, hulls sticking up here and there in seemingly random distribution.

The suitcase was in the cargo rack, and Gardner pulled it down delicately. Inside were his jewels, his loupe, and—his sonic generator. The jewels were worth at least a million, but Earth Central hadn't minded the expense; it was the generator that counted.

Grasping the handle firmly, he jogged down the catwalk, across the field, and toward the customs shed.

An eagle-faced Lurioni, swarthy and with bright gleaming eyes, pounced on him as he entered.

"Over here, please. Name, please?"

"Loy Gardner, of Earth." There was little point in adopting an alias.

"Occupation?"

"Jewel-merchant."

At that, the Lurioni's eyes brightened. "Hmm. Interesting. Your papers, please?"

Gardner handed over his passport and his jewel-peddler's permit. The alien scrutinized them carefully and said, "I'll have to examine your baggage, of course. Please step through with me."

The Lurioni led him to an inner room and opaqued the windows. "Open the suitcase, please."

Gardner opened it. The alien brushed through his personal effects in a matter-of-fact way, without showing any great curiosity, and gestured to the pouch of jewels.

"These?"

"My merchandise." Gardner undid the drawstring and revealed three uncut blue-white diamonds, a tri-colored tourmaline, a large pale star

sapphire, a glittering opal. It was a curious mixture of precious and semi-precious. Reaching deeper into the pouch, he drew out three garnets, a large emerald, a ruby. The customs man checked each stone off against the list on Gardner's invoices, nodded, and pointed to the generator that lay wrapped in the corner of the suitcase.

"What's this?"

Gardner stiffened and tried to conceal his momentary discomfort. "That—is a sonic generator," he said. "I use it to test gems—to see if they're genuine." Silently he added, *And it's part of a chain of generators that will split this planet into so much sand.*

"An interesting device," the alien said casually.

"And very useful," Gardner said.

"No doubt." The Lurioni made a fluttering motion with his seven-fingered hands. "Jewel merchant, eh? Well, your papers seem in order. Put your pebbles away and pass through." The alien's eyes glittered. Gardner caught the hint. He scooped up the gems, allowing one of the diamonds to slip through his fingers.

It bounced loudly on the smooth floor.

"You seem to have dropped

one of your stones," the Lurioni remarked dryly.

Gardner shook his head emphatically. "Are you sure? I didn't hear anything." He grinned.

The alien matched the grin, but there was nothing warm about it. "I guess I was mistaken, then. Nothing dropped. Nothing at all."

As Gardner left, he glanced back warily and saw the Lurioni stooping, reaching for the diamond.

*Rule One, he thought. A smart jewel-merchant always bribes the customs men. They expected it as their due.*

## CHAPTER II

GARDNER rented a small room in a crowded section of the big city. He was not anxious to attract attention.

Present figures had it that some three thousand Terrans were living on Lurion. That would help. Of these, more than a hundred were jewel-merchants; the Lurioni were good customers for baubles of almost any sort. That would help, too; Gardner had to remain inconspicuous.

The three thousand Terrans were expendable. For the past year, ever since the computer's projected data had revealed that Lurion would

destroy Earth if it were not destroyed first, Earth Central had kept a careful, if subtle, check on passports to Lurion. No one was allowed to go there whose death might be lamentable. On the other hand, it was necessary to have a goodly number of Terrans there to provide protective camouflage for the Security team.

The entire project had been planned very carefully. Of course, the *first* team had benefitted from careful planning too—and where were they? Gardner would have to be sure to avoid their mistakes.

The three remaining members of his crew were scheduled to arrive at intervals of approximately one week, each at a different spaceport on a different continent. Gardner had the arrival times of each etched carefully into his memory; he didn't dare entrust any detail of the project to paper. Lurion's death was going to be of natural causes, and woe betide Gardner if the Lurioni, the Terran people themselves, or any other race of the galaxy got wind of exactly what was taking place.

It would mean the end of Earth's dominion in the universe if that happened. More than that, it would mean the

end of Earth—sixty-seven years prematurely.

Five generators were needed; five of them, to be set up at specified spatial intervals and resonate with the same deadly note. And Lurion would crumble in on itself, and be no more.

It was simpler, Gardner thought, to declare all-out war, or else to drop a fission bomb directly into Betelgeuse. But a war required a provocation, and Terra preferred not to make war—while Betelgeuse was far too huge a star to toy with so casually. The consequences might not be so easy to deal with.

No. This was the only way.

He looked around his room. There was the pouch of jewels, and over there the generator. On his wrist, the indicator. It would be three weeks before Damon Archer arrived to complete the team. There was nothing to do but wait.

**L**ATER that first night he tried to sleep, but he was awakened almost immediately by the annoying buzz of his door-announcer.

"Yes?"

"Call for you, Mr. Gardner. You'd better take it downstairs."

He struggled out of bed and into his clothes. "Thank you," he said wearily. "I'll be there right away."

It took him several minutes to dress. When he opened the door, a grinning Lurioni boy stood there, obviously waiting for a tip. *Persistent devil*, Gardner thought, and gave the boy a coin.

The youngster took it grudgingly and stepped aside. Gardner carefully locked and sealed his door. "Will you show me to the phone?"

"Maybe."

Gardner scowled and handed over another coin. "This way," the boy said.

The phone was a public-communicator type, without visi-screen. "Hello?" Gardner said.

"Mr. White?"

"N-no—yes. Yes, this is white," Gardner said hastily, catching on. "Who's this, please?"

"A friend of yours from the old country, Mr. White. Maybe you don't remember me, but perhaps if I could get to see you, you'd realize that I had red blood in my veins."

Red. It was Smee.

"A very good idea," Gardner said, coming awake rapidly. "Where can we get together?"

"There's a bar I like on

One Thousand Six and the Lane of Light," Smee said. "It's in North City. Care to meet me there in—say, an hour?"

"Fine," Gardner said, and hung up. He hadn't bothered to arrange any identification signals; Smee was smart enough to find some way of identifying himself, and the less there was between them by way of signals the safer things were.

He went back upstairs and checked the seal on his door, just to satisfy curiosity. Sure enough, it had been approached—probably by the same boy who had brought him the message. But the seal hadn't been touched, merely investigated. There was no way to get that single giant molecule off the door without the key, and since the key happened to be Gardner's breath he wasn't particularly worried about being robbed. Thumbprints could be imitated, but it was a little harder to match a man's breath.

He exhaled and the door-seal slid together into a globe the size of his fist. Putting his thumb to the conventional doorplate lock underneath, he opened it and went in.

His wallet was lying where he had left it. He slipped a

few bills out, put the wallet away, and locked up again. He headed downstairs and hailed a cab.

**S**MEE was short and balding, but with a wiry toughness about him that did plenty to explain why he had survived and the other four members of his team hadn't.

He was sitting in a back corner of the bar, sipping a greenish drink, when Gardner walked in. Gardner spotted him immediately, and the register in the back of his mind clicked and said *There he is* instinctively.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Smee looked up from his drink. "Suit yourself, friend. There's plenty of room."

Gardner wondered whether he had been recognized. He sat down and said, "Mighty white of you, mister."

The other grinned. "Hello, Gardner. Glad you're here."

"Smee?"

"Of course."

A bartender appeared, fawned servilely, and said, "Would the Earthman care for a drink?"

"The Earthman would. Suppose you give me—ah—the same thing my friend here is having."

"Certainly. One *khall*, at once. Do you drink it cool or warm?"

"Cool," Gardner bluffed.

The alien put the drink before him and Gardner stared at it reflectively before sipping. He had read Smee's report on the unhappy fate of his predecessor. He saw Smee watching him curiously.

"An unfortunate predilection for drinking *khall* was the undoing of a friend of ours," Smee remarked.

"I know," Gardner said. "I'm curious." He touched the glass hesitantly to his lips. *Khall* was sweet on first taste, with an immediate aftertaste of sourness. It was a subtle sort of drink, but not one that Gardner would care to have often. "Interesting," he said. "But I'd hardly feel the loss if I never had any again."

The short man smiled. "Each man has his own poison. Davis liked *khall*. It—made him forget things."

"I see you're drinking it. Do you want to forget too?"

"I've been here six months," Smee said. "I won't get forgetfulness out of a bottle that easily. When are your friends due here?"

"One, two, and three weeks. It'll be good to have the whole gang of us together, won't it?"

"Downright jolly," Smee said. He frowned. "Any trouble yet?"

"Trouble?"

"Inside, I mean."

Gardner saw what Smee meant, and shook his head. "No. Not yet. But there's three weeks yet, isn't there?"

"Yes. Three weeks." Smee sipped at his drink, and ran thick fingers through the fuzz on his head. "Long time, Gardner. Very long time."

Gardner suddenly realized that Smee was drunk. *Well, who wouldn't be?* he asked himself. *Six months on a planet you've been told to blow up.* He wondered what he would be like, if it took six months this time. He hoped fervently that Leopold and Archer and Weegan got there on time.

"Are you planning to stay on this continent?" Smee asked suddenly.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh—nothing, I guess. Except that in the original set-up this was my area. And we can't all be in the same place, of course."

"Naturally," Gardner said. "I'll stay here. You know this place better; you can move on. Take Continent East."

Smee sighed. "Very well, then. I'll be there when the time comes."

A very special geographical distribution was necessary if the generator were to produce its effect. Lines of force had to be drawn through the planet, from hemisphere to hemisphere. The five would be together only at the very end, after the generators had been activated, when they fled in Gardner's ship.

He began to regret having met Smee. The plan was so set up that there was no real need for the conspirators to have personal contact; when the indicator band glowed on five wrists in five colors, the time had come, and each man knew where he was to be and what he was to do. Gardner looked at the rings under Smee's deepset eyes and shivered. Six months of waiting, and Smee was still here—but how much damage had been done to him?

"I think I'll be going," Gardner said. "You woke me up. I haven't slept in a while."

Smee caught his wrist with a surprisingly powerful grip. "Why not wait? There's a floor show starting in ten minutes. You may find it interesting."

"I'd rather—"

"Please wait," Smee said strangely. "The floor show here is unique. I . . . find it healthy to watch it."

Gardner shrugged. He was wide awake now anyway. "All right. I'll stay."

**T**HE TABLES in the front of the bar were cleared away, the front windows opaqued so no outsiders would get free looks, and a sphincter in the wall to Gardner's right irised open. There was a sudden hush in the bar.

A beam of blue light knifed through the opening in the wall, focussed sharply on the opposite wall, and held there. A bolt of bright yellow followed, spearing into the blue. The colors twined, moved along the wall, suddenly blanked out—

And two Lurioni stepped through.

They were a man and a woman, wearing only brief loincloths. A harsh red light shot down from the ceiling and illuminated their thin, jointed bodies. Gardner looked at them with interest.

The Lurioni were humanoid, nearly human in form—bipeds, mammalian, with swarthy skins insulating them against the fierce radiations of Betelgeuse. Adipose tissue was at a premium on Lurion; they were a lean race. Seven many-jointed fingers gave them a vaguely spidery ap-

pearance that was weird.

The two in the center of the floor began to dance—stiffly, precisely, to grave music piping from a grille in the wall. Gardner shuddered a little at the music; he had a delicate sense of pitch, and the excruciating quarter-tone intervals and jarring discordances affected him strongly.

The music accelerated, and so did the dancers. The off-stage instruments struck a clashing chord and the female dancer went into an awkward pirouette.

She spun for a moment, then fumbled at her loincloth. A knife flashed in the red spotlight—and a red line traced itself down the golden chest of the male dancer.

Gardner caught his breath. "What sort of dance *is* this?" he asked.

Smee smiled mellowly. "Entertainment here runs to the morbid side. If we're lucky, maybe the management was able to afford to hire a kill tonight. There hasn't been one here in weeks." He took another drink, grinning complacently.

Gardner felt cold. The dance continued, unwinding inexorably; the dancers were moving at a frenzied pace, and their dark bodies were glistening with sweat. The

male dancer had a knife too, Gardner saw; it flickered momentarily in the seven-fingered hands, and a line of blood appeared between the girl's breasts. The dancers separated, spun at opposite ends of the hall, came together again.

The girl's knife slit the man's arm. They were precise, delicate strokes, not butcher-swings; Gardner estimated that none of the cuts penetrated very much deeper than the outer skin. But the dancers were obviously feeling the pain, and as he looked around he saw the patrons—Lurioni, chiefly—staring eagerly at them, waiting for the climax of the dance. An invisible drum began beating. A flute wailed atonally.

The dancers closed, danced apart, rejoined. Each time, a cut was inflicted. They seemed to be outdoing each other in the attempt to make the cut as artistic as possible. He wondered if either saw the knife coming before the moment of pain.

"Don't they feel it?" Gardner asked.

"Of course not," Smee said. "They're doped to the eyebrows. It's the customers who feel it."

Looking around, Gardner saw that he was right. Total



empathy had been achieved. The patrons were rocking back and forth, grunting a little at the infliction of each wound, grinning fiercely, swaying and murmuring. Gardner found himself falling into the wild rhythms of the music, and nervously checked himself.

The dancers were moving jerkily now, their former angular grace transformed into a marionette-like parody. The male dancer was soaked with blood and perspiration; the female had come off slightly better, and Gardner suddenly realized that there was going to be a kill tonight, and it was the male who would die.

The music swung upward. The girl moved in, dancing bouncily on the outer edges of her feet, lifting the knife, letting it sparkle in the dimmed spotlight, preparing now for the final moment, the climax—

And the lights went on.

Gardner felt the wrench back into reality with a painful tug, and knew the impact on the others must have been even more violent. The dancers were frozen in mid-floor, looking merely naked and no longer nude; their eyes were vacant, their arms dangled limply, and they seemed totally bewildered.

Four uniformed Lurioni stood at the door.

*It's a raid*, Gardner thought wildly. He was right. The patrons suddenly made a scrambling dash for the windows, the rear doors, any available exit; Gardner felt Smee's powerful hand gripping his wrist again, dragging him away. He looked back and saw the four policemen laying about them viciously with heavy truncheons. Several of the patrons lay sprawled on the floor, blood welling from their scalps. The two dancers stood grotesquely in the dance area, covered with their own blood. They were holding hands, joining forces against the sudden encroachment of the outer world.

"Come on," Smee whispered harshly. "I know the way."

A moment later they were outside, in a deserted-looking alley. Gardner felt himself trembling, and impatiently stiffened in a half-successful attempt to regain control.

"Why didn't you tell me this place was illegal?" he demanded angrily. "If we're ever caught by the police and given any kind of truth-check we're all cooked!"

Smee stared at him blandly. "The place isn't illegal," he said. "And the policemen never arrest anyone."



"Huh?"

"They felt like staging a raid, so they had one. All they wanted to do was bang people with truncheons. That's the way this planet works."

"And you knew that before you invited me here?"

"I knew there was a chance of a raid. But what do you want to do—hibernate until the fifth man is here?"

Gardner shook his head. "No—no, you're right. It did me good to see this thing to-night."

A light late-evening drizzle was falling, now; the air was warm and muggy. But inside he felt chilled. Smee looked

completely sober now.

"We'd better not see each other again," Smee said. "Not until the time comes."

"All right," Gardner said. "Not until the time comes."

### CHAPTER III

THEY PARTED, going in separate directions, and Gardner found himself alone in the rainy night.

Oddly, the scene he had just witnessed had calmed and soothed, rather than upset him. He knew he was groping for rationalizations, for reasons for destroying Lurion. It was sheer soft-head-



edness, of course; no reason was necessary beyond that of mere precaution.

But precaution was an abstraction, and Gardner operated from concretes. He wanted to see himself as an executioner, not a murderer. *Okay*, he thought. *A world that thrives on that sort of senseless cruelty deserves what it's going to get.*

*False piety*, a mocking voice within him said. *Holier-than-thou is a good excuse for anything, eh?*

He kept walking, stiff-legged, stiff-minded.

The city's name was City. His room was in South City.

He was in North City, now. The three splintery moons above cast a feeble and confusing light, as he made his way through the untidy streets. He wanted to walk, to keep walking, to walk the tension and fear out of his system before he found a cab and returned to his room.

He had no idea which way he was going. The streets were silent now. It was nearly two hours past midnight.

He turned into a street lined on both sides with grubby little residential dwellings, and someone hit him from behind.

It was a light, glancing

blow—but the one that followed nearly knocked him sprawling. He recovered, danced away, and turned around.

A pair of young Lurioni stood there, grinning.

"Hello, Earthman."

They seemed to be boys—though it was hard to tell, with the Lurioni; they wore open jackets, and the rain had soaked them to the skin. "Got any money, Earthman?"

Gardner let an expression of abject fear crawl across his face. "You—you want to rob me?"

"Rob you? Hah! Who said anything about robbing you, Earthman? We just want your money!"

"Oh. Well—"

"Hit him," one of the boys whispered to the other. The smaller of the two advanced boldly to Gardner and struck him in the stomach. Gardner rode with the blow, but allowed an agonized grunt to escape.

"Hand over your cash, or we'll give you more, Earthman."

"Sure," Gardner said. "Sure. Just don't hit me again." He reached for his right-hand pocket, but the taller boy said, "Uh-uh, friend. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Now tell us which one, and

we'll take it out for you."

"The right-hand one," Gardner said.

"Get the money," the tall boy commanded.

Gardner poised tensely while the younger boy slipped a hand into his pocket and started to draw out his billfold. Suddenly Gardner turned at a right angle, pulling his pocket tight shut and trapping the boy's hand. He grabbed the boy's wrist, arched his back, bent his knees, and flipped.

The lightweight Lurioni went into the air heels first and crashed into his companion. Gardner was on them the next second, taking advantage of their astonishment. He straddled them and clamped one hand on each throat. They glared up at him, hate in their eyes.

"I think I'll strangle you," Gardner remarked. "One with each hand." He tightened his grip on the throats, kneeling at the same time on their chests. They kicked and flailed their arms, but to no avail.

After a moment he released them. They made no attempt to rise, and he backed away a step or two.

"Stay right there until I'm around the corner," Gardner ordered brusquely. "I'll let

you both have it with my blaster if either of you gets up."

He had no blaster. But they made no sign of moving.

He edged away, facing them. They remained flattened against the wet pavement until he was at the end of the street.

"You can get up now—and start running, in the opposite direction."

They rose. But the older boy suddenly produced a knife from somewhere in his jacket and thrust it into his companion's body. Gardner gasped as the tall boy coolly watched his companion crumple, then turned and trotted away.

*A pleasant planet*, Gardner thought.

For the first time, he found himself impatient for the completion of the mission.

**T**HREE DAYS of the first week went by without incident. Gardner spent most of his time in the vicinity of his hotel, took special care not to risk staying out too late—his life was too precious to the project to chance it on the streets in so dangerous a city.

He sent Smee a note, advising him to make the transfer

at once and get going on to the continent where he belonged. He didn't want Smee getting mixed up in anything here in City either. Even though he had survived six months on Lurion, he wouldn't necessarily be immune to a policeman's truncheon or a Lurioni delinquent's knife.

The trouble with the project, Gardner thought, was that every man was indispensable. Five generators was the minimum, and one member of the team backing out would snafu the entire enterprise.

But he tried not to think of the project. He concentrated on selling his jewels, in case the authorities might be checking on him.

The jewels would have to be very carefully managed. He had to spin them out to last at least the three weeks, and probably a good deal more. He had the usual six-month visa, but he dreaded the thought of spending his days with no occupation to keep his mind away from the project.

He hustled around in the small group of Terrans in City, meeting them, setting up an identity as a jewel-merchant, getting to know them. Again, protective camouflage;

a newly-arrived Terran would be *expected* to seek people from his home world.

In Gardner's case, though, it hurt. In three weeks or so, he knew, he would be on his way back to Earth—while the people he was meeting and befriending now would perish, expendable, with all of Lurion.

It didn't help to meet the girl, either.

Her name was Lori Marks, and she was an anthropologist. Gardner met her on the third day, in the lobby of the hotel where he was staying.

"Hello, Earthman. You live here, or just visiting?"

"I live here," Gardner said. The girl was tall and wide-eyed, with hair dyed green and cheekbones just a shade too wide. She looked very attractive. Realizing the dangers of any such encounter, Gardner tried to move on, but she was in a conversational mood.

"I live here too," she said, laughing prettily. "They told me at the desk that another Terran had checked in, but I didn't know if you were the one. It's good to see a friendly face again."

"Yes," Gardner said vaguely. "I really must run along, now. I—"

She was pouting. "You

don't have to run away so fast, you know. I'm not going to bite."

Gardner forced a good imitation of a chuckle. "Okay, then. Can I buy you a drink?"

**H**E SAW a good deal of her in the next three days—too much, he admitted bitterly. They spent most of their time in the hotel casino, since Gardner steadfastly refused to try to lure her to his room, and carefully avoided any opportunity of entering hers.

As they sat together at the casino table, Gardner wondered just what she thought of him. That he was a queer one, certainly—either a man with an unbreakably puritan frame of mind, or one who just didn't care for women. She was wrong on both counts, Gardner thought, but he didn't dare let her find that out.

"It's funny, you being a jewel-merchant, Loy."

"How so, funny?"

"Funny because I always pictured a jewel-merchant as a little shrunken sort of man with a squint in his eyes from peering through his loupe. You don't look the part, dammit!"

"Sorry," he said. "Remind

me to shrink next time I see you. And someday remind me to tell you what I think anthropologists ought to look like."

She giggled delightedly. "Touche!"

She was a graduate anthropology student, working on her doctoral thesis. It was an interesting topic she had chosen: *Abnormal Cruelty on Civilized Worlds*. She had certainly come to the right world for that, he agreed. And then he remembered that in three weeks—a little more than two, now—he was going to kill this girl and the three billion Lurioni she was studying.

"How long are you planning to stay on Lurion?" he asked, trying to sound merely formally curious.

"Oh, another month or so, I guess. My visa's up in two months, but I've seen about all the cruelty I want to see. These people have perfected it astonishingly well. You'd be surprised how many happy marriages there are here—with one partner a sadist and the other a masochist."

"It's a sensible arrangement," Gardner said. "You're leaving in a month, eh? Guess I'll be on Terra before ye, in that case. I'll be going in two, two-and-a-half weeks."

Her eyes brightened. "I envy you. Frankly, I'm sick of this place. If I could get passage back I'd leave with you, but all the ships out are booked solid for a month."

*You could leave with me*, Gardner thought, and then he reflected that there was room for no more than five in his ship, and members of his team had to have priority.

*She's expendable*, he told himself savagely. *Earth Central would never have approved her visa if she had any value to anybody. She'll have to die with the rest of them.*

"You look pale, Loy. Something the matter?"

"No—nothing," he said. "Not enough alcohol in me, that's all."

He took a hefty slug of *khall* and stared broodingly at the swirling greenish liquor remaining in the glass. He wondered if his predecessor, Davis, had also met a girl on Lurion. The *khall* helped to numb the guilt, all right.

"You really can't be feeling all right," she said. Her hand touched his, and, irritably, he snatched it away.

He apologized immediately, but he knew he had hurt her.

*She's just a lonely kid on an ugly world, and I'm being nasty to her.*

A line of Shakespeare drift-

ed back to him. The Moor of Venice, in an agony of contrition: "*I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee—*"

"You are a strange one," she said.

He grinned. "I'm still sober, that's all. Let's go out and get drunk."

**H**E GOT very carefully and meticulously crooked, maintaining iron control over himself all the while. He had just enough *khall* to numb the burgeoning guilt growing within him, but not enough to cause him to say or do anything indiscreet.

She was somewhat less careful. Within an hour she was volubly prattling of her oedipus complex, her very real fear of becoming a spinster schoolteacher in some college's anthropology department, her feeling of repugnance for Lurion and all that happened there. In short, she tossed at Gardner her entire self, the *persona* lurking behind the mask.

Had he been a little more sober, he would have stopped her before it was too late, before she had given so much of herself that it would be impossible for him to kill her. But—being carefully insulated by a precise quantity of

*khall*—he listened, he heard, and he remembered, without being affected.

Nice kid, he thought. *Probably are a lot of nice Earth folk on Lurion. Even some nice Lurioni, maybe.*

*But that's not going to stop me.*

Sometime later that day he took her back upstairs, kissed her lightly outside her room, and watched her stagger inside and topple on the bed. She didn't invite him in, and he wasn't looking for an invitation. He closed the door and went to his own room.

As usual, the seal had been tinkered with. The management knew he was a jeweler-merchant, and were dead set on robbing him before he left, but there just wasn't any way of penetrating that seal. He broke it with a quick blast of air—the signal wasn't affected by the alcohol fumes on his breath—entered, and sealed the door from the inside.

The next day, he took her to the bar on One Thousand Six and the Lane of Lights, the place where he had met Smee.

He half expected to see Smee again. But the short man wasn't there; Gardner hoped he had followed his orders and moved on to his per-



manent location in the East.

"You'll see cruelty at its most refined tonight," he promised her.

He hoped there would be a raid, with all the ruthless violence of the last one. He hoped the knife-dancers would be out in full glory.

They took a table at the back, where he had sat with Smee.

"What time does the show start?" she asked.

"An hour after midnight or so," Gardner said. "We've got lots of time yet."

They ordered drinks—*khall*, of course. Sipping hers, Lori said, "Can I have a preview of what I'm going to see? It always helps when I'm not taken by surprise."

Gardner told her. She coughed a little and said, "Very lovely. I'm going to have the most lurid doctoral thesis ever written, when I get back. I could fill a whole book with the sins of Lurion."

*When I get back*, she had said. Gardner shrugged it off. "It ought to make for exciting reading—if your examiners like exciting reading, that is."

"They don't. It's not the number of instances of cruelty I cite that's the test: it's my evaluation. They won't give me a doctorate just for a

catalogue of atrocities. It's the analysis they want to read. They'll skip through all the luridness to find out *why* I think Lurion is this way, how it got this way. That's what's important in anthropology: not what, but how and why."

The evening passed slowly. Gardner fought a rousing inner battle to keep sober; he won, but it was far from easy. The thought of Davis kept him temperate—Davis, the sober Security man who had turned into a rummy in two weeks on Lurion.

Shortly after midnight the familiar hush fell over the place, and the tables were cleared away. The wall sphinctered open.

The dancers appeared. They were different ones, and this time they were three instead of two—two men and a woman. Music began to grind in the background, and the dance started.

He glanced at Lori. She was watching, fascinated.

The dance wound through to its conclusion this time. Feeling a curious chill, Gardner saw the two males advance stiffly on the female and transfix her suddenly with both their knives.

"Sexual symbolism?" Lori muttered, taking notes at a

rate Gardner found fantastic.

Gardner gasped. The female was crumpling daintily to the floor, the audience was drumming its heels in applause—and Lori had not lost her composure. True scientific detachment, that. Remarkable.

A riot of lights bathed the floor as the dead dancer was removed. Suddenly, a new light struck Gardner's eyes—a sharp, insistent flash of green.

He glanced at the indicator band on his wrist. The green panel was pulsating brightly.

Deever Weegan had just arrived.

"Something wrong?" Lori asked. "You look sick again."

"I'm just not used to public bloodshed," he said casually. "I'm not an anthropologist, you know."

His fingers were quivering. He looked at the firm green light again.

Three-fifths of the chain that would destroy Lurion had been forged.

#### CHAPTER IV

**I**T TOOK nearly a week for Weegan to get in touch with him, and by that time the blue panel on the indicator band was glowing as well; Kully Leopold had arrived,

one whole day prematurely.

That made four. Only Damon Archer, the anchor man on the team, was yet to be heard from, and he would be arriving in another week.

It was necessary that the team members space their arrivals. There was a regular pattern of coming and going between Lurion and Earth, just as there was between Earth and every other world of the galaxy. The five team members would not be noticed if they entered Lurion one at a time. And, since their landings were scheduled for five different spaceports on five different continents, it was unlikely that the sonic generator each carried would cause much excitement, unless the customs officials bothered to compare notes on strange devices.

Smee had arrived with a tourist group six months earlier. His generator was already accounted for as a souped-up camera, which it had been redesigned to resemble. Gardner's was a jeweller's apparatus. The others each had their alibis too.

By now, Gardner had had a visi-screen installed in his room, for the benefit of customers who might want to call him.

At least, that was the os-

tensible reason. But he anticipated calls from the newly-arriving members of his team, and he wanted to be able to see their faces as they spoke. He was something more than a figurehead leader; it was his job to see that each of the other four was alert, stable, and ready to do his job when the time came.

Gardner wondered what might happen if one of them weren't ready. Himself, for instance.

Weegan called him shortly after Leopold had landed. Gardner stared at the image in the screen, comparing it with the photo of Weegan he had seen back on Earth in Karnes' office.

"You're Gardner, aren't you?"

"Right. Weegan?"

The man in the screen nodded. "Of course."

Weegan had an ascetic look about him. His eyes were so stony they seemed to glitter; his cheekbones jutted sharply beneath each ear, and his thin, bloodless lips were set in an austere line. Gardner wondered if the inner man were as coldly bleak as the exterior.

"What's on your mind, Weegan? You're set up all right where you are, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm simply checking."

"Checking on me?"

"Checking on the project in general. I want it to work well."

Gardner gasped and went pale. Was Weegan out of his mind, talking of "the project" so loosely over a public communicator. "The sale of gems is going well," Gardner said icily. "I imagine we'll all return to Earth rich men."

Weegan seemed to recognize his error. "Oh—of course. Are the other members of the corporation doing well?"

"I think so," Gardner said. "Dudley and I were in contact the other day, and he said vegetables were set for a rise. Better check with your stockbroker. And Oscar told me his wife is better." *Catch wise, you idiot. Don't ask a foolish question now.*

"I'm glad to hear it," Weegan said. "Well, we'll be in touch again, won't we?"

"In about a week, I think. Is that soon enough?"

"No, but it'll have to do," Weegan said. He broke the contact.

**G**ARDNER stared at the dying swirl of color on the screen for a moment, letting some of the blood seep back into his

face, letting the butterflies in his large intestine settle into place.

If he hadn't managed to shut Weegan up in time, the thin-faced man might have gone prattling on, inquiring after Smee and Leopold and the not-yet-arrived Archer, linking the five of them neatly in one breath. It might not give the show away, but anything that tended to link the team was dangerous. If someone should remember those names and decide to have another look at the innocent-seeming gadgets each had brought with him to Lurion, they were as good as dead.

Worse. If the Lurioni discovered what the generators could do, they wouldn't be content merely to devise unpleasant deaths for the five. They'd plaster news of the conspiracy all over the universe, and Earth's name would be something to spit at.

Naturally, Earth would deny any official connection with the five, but who would believe them? Five men don't decide on their own initiative to destroy a planet.

Shuddering, Gardner cursed Weegan, cursed Karnes, cursed the computer whose clicking relays had gotten them into this business in the first place. And then a new

thought occurred to him.

The computer had presumably had a hand in choosing the first, the unsuccessful team. Well, the computer had been 80 per cent wrong that time; only Smee had had the stuff to survive.

So another team had been sent out, of whom at least one—Weegan—had the non-survival characteristic of failing to reason out the consequences of his words. And one other—Gardner himself—was given to serious interior misgivings about the whole project.

That made at least two of the computer's four new selections who weren't perfectly fitted for the job—and he hadn't even met the other two, yet.

It wasn't a very good score.

Suppose — *suppose* — the computer's accuracy on long-range predictions was equally miserable?

Suppose it was all cockeyed about the anticipated Lurioni invasion of Earth?

Suppose he was murdering a world that meant no harm?

Sudden perspiration popped out all over him—and, just as suddenly, he was past the conflict-point and secure in his belief.

Lurion was an abysmal world. It was a hateful, cold,

nasty place. It was the sort of world on which you didn't turn your back on anyone without two affidavits, and even then rear-view vision was a useful precaution.

The galaxy wouldn't be losing anything by losing Lurion—and if there was a chance Lurion might attack Earth, Lurion would have to go. Unquestionably.

For the first time in a number of days, Gardner smiled, confident that the computer was right and he was right and that the job he was doing was right.

And then he heard Lori Marks' voice in the corridor calling to him, and his newly-found complacency was shattered in an instant.

**"L**ov? Loy? Can I come in?"

"Just a minute, Lori. I'll have to unseal the door." Sweat started to course down his body again; this was going to be the test. It was the first time she had ever come to his room.

He breathed on the seal and it curled into a ball. A moment later he had the door open.

She was holding some type-written sheets in her hand. "I've just finished typing up

my notes on that horrid dance we saw, and I wondered if you'd want to check through them for accuracy. As a fellow eye-witness, that is."

"Be happy to," he said. But he could tell that she hadn't come up here simply to have him read her anthropological observations. She was wearing a lowcut synthilk blouse that was calculated toward a session of biology, not anthropology. And for the first time since he'd known her she wore perfume.

As he took the notes from her she said, "I hope you won't have too much trouble with the spelling. My machine is out of kilter, and I had to use one of the local voicewriters. It's good and efficient, but phonetically a nightmare."

"I'll manage," Gardner said.

He skimmed through the first paragraph or two of her notes and allowed himself to appear to be reading the rest. Actually his mind was occupied with decision-making.

By the time he had finished his pseudo-scanning of the notes, he had made up his mind.

"Well?" she asked.

"Hmm. Nice and accurate, I'd say. A bit lacking in real sparkle, though. You don't

fully convey the nastiness of the situation."

She nodded. "I thought so too when I read them back. Got any suggestions?"

"Focus it more sharply on the people watching the thing. Not us, but the others. The ones busy empathizing with the dancers. That's the really nasty part of the business."

"You're right," she said. "I'll add that when I'm preparing my submission."

She peered curiously at the sonic generator, which Gardner had never bothered to hide—a doorseal is too efficient to make much furtiveness necessary—and took a seat next to him.

Her intention in coming up here was almost embarrassingly obvious. Gardner felt a fleeting sense of guilt about what he was going to do, and banished the sensation. There was to be no more guilt about this.

As she snuggled close to him he edged away, then stood up and said in a brittle voice, "Would it be too melodramatic if I said I had Something To Tell You, Lori?"

"No. Of course not, Loy. Tell me anything you want." Her eyes were half-closed and a little dreamy.

"I'm married," he said. It was a flat lie. "I have a wife and family back on Terra, and I'm very devoted to them. And before our relationship gets any more awkward than it already is, I feel you ought to know that I'm very much in love with my wife."

She looked steam-rollered. The dreaminess vanished from her eyes, to be replaced with a catlike expression of insult and injury. "I'm sorry to hear that," she said softly.

"I understand. If—if circumstances had been otherwise, Lori, well—maybe—you know what I'm trying to say. But as it is—"

She stood up, making the job easier for him. He gripped her hand. He had never felt like such a heel in his life.

"I don't think we ought to see each other any more," he told her. "I'm only going to be on Lurion another week, and it would be easier for both of us—"

"Of course, Loy." There was a surprising curtness in her voice that both pleased and puzzled him. He had feared she might go to pieces completely—but he hadn't expected her to find this sudden reserve of strength.

"Good-bye," he said.

She picked up her notes,

smiled bleakly at him, and left without a word. Moving mechanically, Gardner replaced the doorseal, then stared unseeingly at the dirty black streaks against the dingy green of the walls.

It was easier now, he thought. She'd die hating him. That way, it wouldn't be so hard.

If he could only keep out of her way for the next week—

Suddenly the yellow panel on his indicator band pinged into brightness. He looked at it dazedly for a moment, not understanding.

Damon Archer was on Lurion—the fifth man in the chain. And he was a week ahead of schedule.

Tensely, Gardner poured a drink from the *khall* bottle he now kept on his table. If Archer were here—and the indicator band said he was—then Lurion's remaining time could be numbered in hours, not in days.

But why was Archer here so early?

## CHAPTER V

**B**EFORE Gardner had arrived at any sort of an explanation, the visi-screen chimed three times—the signal for a long-distance communication.

He placed his drink down carefully out of range of the visual pickup and activated the set.

"Yes?"

It was Smee. The balding operative smiled apologetically. "I hope I'm not disturbing you, Mr. Gardner."

"No—no. What's on your mind?"

"I suppose you're aware that your friend has arrived on Lurion."

"Yes, I know that," Gardner said impatiently. "He got here early. What of it?"

The impatience was suddenly mirrored in Smee's tones. "Six months is a long time, Mr. Gardner. Now that your friend is here, when do we—"

"Soon, Smee. You'll get the word."

"When?"

"I'm not sure," Gardner snapped. "There may be some instructions from the home company, and I don't want to close the deal in haste. Got that?"

Smee sighed heavily. "Let's see that the deal *does* get closed, Gardner."

He broke the contact.

Gardner snatched at the drink and took a healthy swallow. Then he turned away, wincing a little as the liquid hit his stomach.

He couldn't blame Smee. The little man had been on Lurion six months, which was a long time for anyone—particularly someone waiting patiently for a chance to destroy the planet. Smee's only thought was that the team was now complete; let's blow up the works and get back to Earth on the double.

It was understandable. But Gardner couldn't work that way. For one reason or another Archer was early, and until he knew why he couldn't give the blowup order. For all he knew, Archer was carrying a stay of execution for Lurion.

There was a case in point somewhere in Thucydides, he thought. The Athenians had captured the rebellious town of Mitylene, and had determined to put all the inhabitants to the sword. A last-minute meeting of the Assembly voted to reverse the decision, and messengers arrived at Mitylene bearing the reprieve at the very moment the sentence was about to be carried out.

Perhaps Lurion was reprieved as well, Gardner thought. He would have to wait until he heard from the newly-arrived Archer.

*And then what?* he wondered.

If there were no reprieve, it would be up to him at last to give the order to fire. And Lurion and the girl and the menace to the Earth of now-plus-sixty-seven would crumble into dust all at once.

He finished the drink. Then, acting with methodical precision, he corked the half-full bottle on the table and dumped it into the disposal chute.

Whatever happened now, he wanted to be sober.

**F**IFTEEN minutes later, the visi-screen emitted the buzz that meant a local call.

He activated the screen, and a strange face appeared. A bland, mild face, undistinguished and not memorable in any way.

"You must be Gardner," the stranger said. "I'm Damon Archer."

"Yes. I knew you were here, and I was expecting to hear from you about your early arrival." Gardner frowned suspiciously. The assignment called for Archer to be on the planet's northernmost continent, a good three thousand miles from here—but he had made a *local* call.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"I'm at the spaceport. I've



just checked through customs, and—"

"What? But your assignment from the company specified that—"

"I know, Mr. Gardner. But I'll have to see you immediately. I want to talk privately with you before we go ahead with anything."

Gardner tensed. "All right. How soon can you be here?"

"Within the hour," Archer said.

Forty-five minutes later, Archer arrived. He was taller and a little leaner than Gardner had expected, but otherwise he had a curiously nondescript quality—or *lack* of quality—that interested Gardner.

Archer looked all around Gardner's single room, noting the sonic generator, the pouch of jewels, the dirty glass. He gestured to the doorseal that Gardner had replaced on the inside of the door.

"Do we need *that* here?"

"It protects us," Gardner said. "I keep it up all the time."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd remove it while I'm here," Archer said. He shivered lightly. "It's—ah—a sort of phobia of mine. Modified claustrophobia, you know. A friend of mine once had his host die on him, and he couldn't get

out of the room. Had to jump into a net from the twelfth floor. He hasn't been the same since."

Gardner shrugged. "I guess we'll be safe enough without it." He hid the generator and the jewel-pouch carefully in the closet, then removed the seal from the room door and put it over the closet door. Curious, he thought; Archer seemed too ordinary to have any phobias. But it was his right to ask for the seal's removal, and Gardner saw no point in insisting.

"Now, then," Gardner said. "May I ask why you're here, instead of at your assigned post?"

"May I speak freely about the nature of—ah—the project?" Archer asked, glancing around furtively.

"If you must," said Gardner. "This room's safe—if there are no eavesdroppers."

He yanked the door open. The corridor outside was deserted. "It looks clear," he said. "Say what you want to say."

Archer folded his legs and tapped the suitcase he had carried with him. "My generator is in here. Yours, I think, is in that closet. Are all five members of the team here, now?"

"Look at your indicator

band," Gardner said, surprised.

"Of course. All five are here. Now, my instructions from Earth Central require me to have a full recapitulation of the nature of our mission from your lips before we can act."

"What the hell for?"

Archer smiled apologetically. "As—pardon me—a check on your stability. Karnes has some misgivings about—about—"

"I know," Gardner grunted. "He uttered them to me before I left. Okay, here's your summary: we've been sent here as a team with the assignment of destroying Lurion. It takes five of us to do it, each equipped with a sonic generator that will set up a vibratory pattern when turned on in the proper geographic locality. I'm in charge."

"Who picked you for the job?"

"Karnes. Chief of Security at Earth Central. With the aid of the computer, of course."

"And—why is it necessary to destroy Lurion?"

"The computer prognostics have it that Lurion will launch a destructive attack on Earth some time in the next seventy years or so. We have to strike first."

Archer sat back, smiling quietly. "All right. You've got it all down well enough. I guess we can proceed on schedule, then."

"I pass the test?"

"You do. When's the event due to take place?"

"As soon as you get up north where you belong," Gardner said. "Give me a call when you get there, and I'll send the signal." He realized now that he had no more doubts, no hesitation whatever about bringing the project to its culmination.

"Very well. I'll leave at once," Archer said.

He rose, tugging his jacket-snaps together and sealing them. Gardner watched him, brows furrowed.

The visi-screen chimed again.

Gardner snapped it on and a round, bearded face appeared—that of Kully Leopold, the only member of the team Gardner had yet to hear from.

"I guess I'll be going," Archer said, a little hurriedly.

"Stick around," Gardner told him. "Let's hear what Leopold has to say." He returned his attention to the screen. "You are Leopold, aren't you?"

"That's right—hey! He's leaving!"



**G**ARDNER whirled and saw Archer, suitcase in hand, fumbling annoyedly with the intricate Lurioni doorlatch. A number of seemingly irrelevant but actually interrelated facts suddenly fitted themselves together.

"Where are you going, Archer?"

"I'm—" He got the door open at last, and without bothering to finish the sentence started to go through.

Gardner jumped.

He grabbed Archer by the shoulder and spun him back into the room; the door slammed shut.

"What's your hurry?" Gardner demanded. "I told you to stick around."

Instead of answering, Archer crashed a fist into Gardner's stomach. Gardner gasped and doubled up, but as Archer brought his fist round for another blow Gardner grabbed it suddenly and flipped Archer over his shoulder.

The thin man landed heavily and scrambled to his feet, but by that time Gardner was on top of him. Archer's eyes were glaring desperately; he strained to roll over, clawed at Gardner's arms, tried to force the heavier man off him.

Gardner slapped him twice, just to loosen him up, then

thumped his head against the floor hard. Archer's eyes closed.

Gardner turned back to the screen. Leopold was still watching, eyes wide in the oval face.

"That was Archer, wasn't it?" Leopold asked. "What in blazes is happening?"

"I don't know," said Gardner. "But he made me take the doorseal down, and then he had me dictate what amounted to a full confession of— of the company's trade secrets. Now he tried a quick getaway. I'm going to look through his suitcase. Call me back in ten minutes or so, will you?"

He broke the contact. He didn't care to have the contents of Archer's suitcase sent out over public beam.

Archer was still unconscious. Good. Gardner slit the suitcase open with a penknife and looked inside.

Much clothing. A small package containing the sonic generator. And—

*What's this?*

A pocket recorder!

Gardner depressed a stud and heard his own voice say, "*We've been sent here as a team with the assignment of destroying Lurion. It takes five of us—*"

Gardner smiled grimly and

pressed the erase stud. Then he drew a glass of water and tossed it in Archer's face. The man on the floor sputtered, coughed, and opened his eyes.

"I've just listened to your little recording," Gardner said. "Who are you working for, Archer?"

"What? How—?"

"Don't bluster your way out of it. Who paid you to wriggle a confession out of me?"

Archer grinned. "No one, yet. But I imagine the Confederacy of Rim Stars will be interested in the way Earth lives up to its high ethical pronouncements."

Gardner was ready this time. He sidestepped as Archer sprang.

The spy was quick on his feet. He ducked back and lunged at Gardner. Gardner left his guard open, took a soft punch below the heart, and sent Archer rocking backward with a stiff jolt to the chin.

Gardner followed it up with a barrage of light punches and a swift crack across Archer's exposed throat. It was dirty fighting, but that didn't matter now.

Archer gagged and started to topple. Gardner caught him neatly, propped him up, and hit him again.

The spy shot backward three feet and cracked sharply against the wall. Gardner winced involuntarily at the sound of the impact. Archer slid slowly to the floor and sprawled there twistedly, his mouth sagging open, his tongue protruding oddly to one side.

Gardner knelt and examined him. He wasn't breathing.

Very carefully now, Gardner took the dead man's recorder and touched the playback stud. The reel had been completely erased. Just to make sure, he opened the mechanism, took out the microtape, and stuffed it thoughtfully into the disposal chute.

So much for Archer. But a new problem presented itself.

Archer had been the fifth man on the team. There were only four of them, now. Smee, Leopold, Weegan, and himself. It took five to set up the generator system so it would be effective.

Archer's generator was in the suitcase—unless the spy had gimmicked it, which was doubtful. But how were they going to work it?

Suppose—

The thought was interrupted. The door opened, and Gardner glanced up, startled,

to see Lori Marks enter the room.

"It isn't like you to leave your door open," she said in a soft voice. "And I think you owe me some explanations, Loy."

## CHAPTER VI

TOGETHER, they stuffed Archer's body in the closet, and together they restored the room to order.

Gardner put the seal on the closet. They'd have to rip up the walls to find Archer.

"I checked the records in the Customs Office," Lori said. "I told them I wanted to know if you were married. They didn't like the idea of showing me your papers, but when I told them you—you had—when I told them, and gave them some money besides, they let me look. Your entrance papers say you're not married. Why did you say you were, Loy? To get rid of me?"

"How much of the conversation between Archer and me did you hear?" he asked.

"Only the very end. When he said something about the Confederacy of Rim Stars paying highly for information—but what has that to do with—"

"Quiet, and listen to me."

Gardner's face was set in a stern mask. "Archer was part of a team of five sent out by Earth Central to do a job on Lurion. Only he sold out, or was planning to as soon as he had the confession from my lips. But I caught on."

"What kind of job?" she asked.

"We were sent here to destroy Lurion."

Her eyes widened for a moment, then focussed on him in a bewildered glare. "What?"

He told her. He told her about Karnes and about the computer, and about the necessity for the mission. And why he had pretended he was married.

When he was all finished, he watched her reaction. She forced a little lopsided smile and said, "And I was studying cruelty on Lurion! I could have stayed at home and done a better job."

"No. You're dead wrong," he said. "There's nothing cruel about what Earth's doing to Lurion. We're killing three billion people, sure. But we're removing a filthy plague-spot from the universe. We're saving Earth and we're protecting the rest of the galaxy."

She shook her head numbly. "You're just acting in cold

blood. You can't deny that."

"We don't want to deny it." He felt oddly calm now, as if he had believed these things all his life and not merely come to grasp them recently. "We know we're acting in cold blood—to save ourselves the trouble of acting in hot blood when Lurion springs its war on us. Lori, this world is rotten. You *know* that."

"Yes. I know that."

"Well, then, eventually some of that rottenness is going to flare up into a galactic war. Billions may be killed; the economies of hundreds of worlds may be disrupted. We can avoid that now."

"There are innocent people on Lurion. There *must* be."

"Some healthy cells have to die when you remove a cancer," Gardner said.

"You would have let *me* die," Lori whispered.

He nodded. "I nearly threw up the whole project because of that. It was a mistake ever getting entangled with you. There was no way to save you—but you were only one person. Billions have to be considered."

"So you said you were married."

"Only to keep you away from me, to keep you from breaking down my determination to go through with the

job. Well, you'll live now. Your ship leaves in two or three weeks, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to send back to Earth for a replacement, now that Archer's dead. By that time you'll be off Lurion and safely on the return trip home."

A frown rippled across her forehead. "You still have Archer's generator, don't you? Isn't it working?"

"I assume so. But the generators have to be widely spaced. I can't be in two places at once when it's time to throw the switches. There'll have to be a replacement."

"How complicated is the generator?" she asked.

"Not very. Why?"

"Maybe I could be the replacement," she said.

**H**E BLINKED and said, "Should I take that at face value or not?"

"I made an offer. I think you need my help. If you don't want it—"

"Lori, are you serious? Why do you want to—to help murder this planet?"

"Maybe I love you, you idiot. Maybe I've spent enough time here to begin thinking it wouldn't be mur-

der, that it would be more like an execution—or a mercy killing." There was a tear at the edge of her eye. Angrily she flicked it away. "Well? Don't you believe your own sales talk, Loy?"

He had no immediate answer. The visi-screen chimed, taking him off the hook.

He expected that it would be Leopold, calling back. But it was Smee. The agent looked agitated.

"Gardner, what's holding things up? All of us are here now. I want to go home, dammit!"

Gardner took a deep breath. "I've got good news for you, Smee. The project's getting under way immediately. And make sure you stay by your generator until I'm there to pick you up."

"I'll be there," Smee said. "Don't worry about that."

Gardner broke the contact and looked at the girl. She was pale and tense, but without any indication of wavering. "Your offer's accepted," he said curtly.

"Where's the generator, and how does it work?"

He unsealed the closet and produced both generators, Archer's and his. Archer's had been modified somewhat; it looked now like a twin-turreted microscope, but the

familiar instruments were all in their proper places.

"Briefly, it's a sound-generator," he told her. "It sets up an inaudible vibration; and when we get that vibration going from five different places on Lurion—*crack!*"

"And how do we all escape afterward?"

"Each generator transmits a characteristic signal that I'll be able to home in on. I'll make a quick trip to the pick-up points and get everybody. We ought to have enough time."

"You'd better be very clear about the part I play in this," Lori said. "Explain it all carefully."

He grinned nervously. "It doesn't take much intelligence to run the thing. In order to set it into action, you depress this lever." He took her hand and touched it to the lever. She drew it back instantly, as if the stud were radioactive.

"You don't have to be afraid of it," he said. "It takes all five to blow up the works. Besides, none of them will work unless mine is activated first. I'm the control man for the circuit."

"How will I know when yours is working?" she asked.

"The moment I flip the lever on my generator, yours



is going to start humming. As soon as that hum begins, you and Weegan and Leopold and Smee are going to activate your individual generators. Then we've got six hours to run for it before the planet caves in, which means I go zooming all over Lurion grabbing team members."

"Where should I be?"

"At the spaceport, of course. I can't land my ship in the middle of the street out here. Pack up any notes you want to take along, take the generator with you, and get down to the spaceport. After the generator's in operation, rent a locker and hide it in there. Those lockers can't be opened in a hurry."

She smiled. "Okay. Let me repeat it to see if I've got it straight."

**I**T WAS ALL so simple, Gardner thought, as he left his ship and headed for the spaceport, cradling the deadly generator under his arm. Just push the buttons, and run for it. And at the push of a finger, a world dies.

The spaceport at Delison, halfway across the planet, looked much like the one at City. Gardner made his way into the jostling crowd, trying to keep his eyes from

meeting the eyes of any of the Lurioni. *In six hours*, he thought—*six hours . . .*

The generator looked as innocent as a camera. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, standing there alone in the midst of the crowd. Then, quietly, he placed his finger on the actuator button—and pushed.

There was a faint droning noise. The white bulb in the generator's panel lit.

He waited. After a moment, the red bulb lit. That was Smee, ever anxious. Then, the green. Weegan.

Someone was peering at him curiously—a tall Lurioni in official uniform. Gardner began to sweat. The blue bulb lit. Leopold.

Just one generator remained inactive—Lori's. The yellow bulb was still dim. He pictured her in an agony of indecision, holding back at the last moment, unable to push the button at the crucial moment.

*Come on, Lori*, he thought savagely, wishing he were telepathic. *Push the button. Push it, kid.*

His hands were quivering, and he realized he was holding the generator too tightly. The locker door hung open, ready to receive its deadly contents.

"Hey, you!" a voice called, harsh, thick, threatening. "What's that gadget you got? A bomb?"

The guard was a hundred feet away and advancing rapidly. *Come on, Lori!*

He froze, unable to move, staring at the unlit bulb on the panel.

And at the last instant the yellow bulb lit.

*Good girl*, he thought. He jammed the now-activated generator into the locker, shut it, slapped his seal on the door. They weren't going to get *that* off in six hours—or sixty!

"Come here, you! What was that thing?"

Gardner put his head down and dashed into a swirling mob. The guard would never dare to fire—not even on Lurion. He pushed and trampled his way back toward his ship, climbed the catwalk at about three lights, and feverishly punched out his first destina-

tion. Back to City, to pick up the girl.

**S**IX HOURS later, the tiny ship hung three quarters of a billion miles from Betelgeuse and three hundred million miles from Lurion. Five pairs of stony eyes stared at the ship's single viewplate.

"It ought to happen just . . . about . . . *now*," Gardner said.

As he spoke, the black dot that was Lurion suddenly—*crumbled!*

Gardner turned away from the viewplate. The others were still staring, in horror, in fascination, at the fragments that had been Lurion.

"We're on our way home," he said tonelessly. He jabbed down hard on the controls and the ship flickered out of normal space and into warp. Lurion was only a memory; Earth lay ahead.

The job was done.



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by  
Thomas N. Scortia

# ALIEN NIGHT

*Huber had a slight  
and bitter choice:  
death in five years  
or death at once.  
Then the three  
alien spaceships  
gave death an  
entirely new  
meaning!*



# Alien Night

by Thomas N. Scortia

## CHAPTER I

**"GET AWAY** from that window!"

The words axed through Kenneth Huber's thoughts, scattering them in jagged fragments. His muscles knotted in abrupt panic. For an instant he felt cold air on his face. His body swayed toward the deep abyss outside the open window of the Universal Building.

Far below the squat pastel buildings of Universal City sprawled in aching sharp regularity along the broad avenues that arrowed toward

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the Mississippi. Then everything blurred as an invisible something seemed to push him forward.

In a black and red blanket of smothering nausea he clutched frantically for support. His fingers closed on slick insulglas, slipped—found metal, held. . . .

He sank to his knees, retching, fighting for consciousness.

After an eternity, he felt Dykeman's fingers digging savagely into his shoulders. Then there was someone on his other side, supporting him as they helped him into a chair.

"You damned fool," Thomas Dykeman snapped, "you think we want to spend the next hour nursing you out of a 'het' field coma?"

Huber tried to focus on the medical executive's green-clad figure and the vaguer mass of green behind him. After a moment he could make them out. The other man was tall and thin, almost skeletal, with thin cheekbones pressing through taut

waxy skin. Max Besser, Dykeman's assistant—whose fatal analysis had been the basis of Huber's death sentence.

"No," Huber said, "I wasn't . . . I couldn't have . . ."

"You're damned right you couldn't have. You sure as hell tried, though."

Dykeman whistled two low notes and the open window panels slid swiftly shut with a thin hiss. The exec nodded silently at Besser, and the man turned to go.

"He doesn't have to leave on my account," Huber said.

"Max has work to do."

As soon as Besser's form faded through the static field that closed the room to light and noise from the neighboring ante-room, Dykeman whirled angrily.

"You should know you can't kill yourself in Universal City! Even if the heterodyne field hadn't stopped you, there's an automatic net outside the window."

*What happened?* Huber asked himself dully. He hadn't meant to jump; he couldn't have. The shock of what Dykeman had told him might have made him consider it, of course, but—No, something had seized his body, had pulled him toward that drop even as he fought it.

"Sure," he said, his voice still shaking, "the Company can't have anyone dying in its happy, happy world."

"Not by their own hands, particularly," Dykeman said.

He slapped a bulky folder on his desk.

"The next damned thing, you'll be trying to join a hunt club."

"Maybe that's better than living through five years of a lingering death," Huber said.

**H**E FLEXED his fingers and rubbed them along his leg. The ortholon of the harlequin costume he wore felt hot and slick to the touch. His hand reached out and closed absently on the grotesque mask he had deposited earlier on the chair-side table. The tiny bells on the hood tinkled faintly.

"My God, Dyke," he said fiercely, "outside that window there are fifty thousand people who come to Universal City every twenty-five years so that Universal Insurance can pump some more of its patent juice into their veins and assure them of another quarter century of life. If one of them smashes himself up in an accident anywhere on the continent, your android emergency squads are on

hand in minutes to patch him up. Every city is so peppered with safety devices like your window net that a man can't scratch his finger. You've ended suicides with the heterodyne field you broadcast from this building and a thousand others in other cities. The moment the abnormal brain pattern preceding suicide forms, the field knocks a man out. The only way a man can die in this world of yours is through an accident in some out-of-the-way place or if someone deliberately kills him in a hunt."

"The company does everything it can to preserve life," Dykeman said tiredly. "As for the hunt clubs . . ."

"Sure," Huber said, "eventually you'll work down that little list on your desk and eliminate one of the last two sources of death in this world of yours."

Dykeman looked at the folder, opened it and fanned the three papers inside over the desk.

"Don't you think that's desirable?" he asked. "Why did you agree to collect the names for us if you didn't?"

Huber shrugged sullenly. He wasn't sure how he felt about a lot of things now.

"Damn it, Ken, you know I'd give anything to help."

"That's small comfort."

"We just don't know a thing about Touzinsky's syndrome. We know it has something to do with the body's retention of iron, that there's a breakdown in the ability of the body's storage protein, apoferritin, to bind the iron as ferritin, but that's all."

"What's the matter with the Company's research program?"

The medic snorted, rose and paced to the window.

"With ten research men on the continent? You're a fine example of what we're up against. What are you? What's your field?"

"You know that. Thermo-nuclear engineering."

"Ever work at it?"

"Well . . ."

"Skip it. I know the answer already. And the same thing is true with the other drones in the world outside. Why waste the years studying when the android technicians carry out the world's work just as well?"

"Whoever said work was a virtue?"

"Bah. That's the guiding principle of this back-to-the-womb age. You were content to risk your life, spying on the hunt clubs, even before you knew you'll die in five years anyway. But you're not

willing to invest any of your life in breaking this strait jacket we've crammed the world into."

"You're the guy who asked me to help with the hunt clubs," Huber said ironically. "Remember the big speech about stamping out this last brutality, this hunting of men by men for the mere stupidity of excitement?"

Dykeman stood silently for a moment, staring out the window. Over his shoulder Huber could see the first pale luminescence playing over the pastel walls of the city below as night approached. He saw a lone ram-jet helicopter beat its sluggish way across the city and he knew that the first scattering of costumed people must already be filling the streets for the night-long carnival that marked the end of the five-day examination period.

"What I do officially," Dykeman said at last, "and what I happen to believe are not always the same."

"About that there's no argument," Huber said tiredly as he secured the harlequin mask from the table. He paused and eyed the reports on Dykeman's desk. Now he no longer had even that to distract him from the nagging fear of lingering death. . . .

It wasn't fair. Why him?

"Look," Dykeman said. "There's nothing we can do. We can't plan everything in the world."

"You try hard enough."

"Nobody said the Company was God," Dykeman said angrily.

"No one states the obvious," Huber snapped, and passed through the static field as the medic's answer passed his lips. The static field cut off anything he might have said.

**B**ESSER was lounging in a low chair near the door, but Huber brushed past him with only a nod. He passed through the hall and threw himself into the induction shaft. As he fell slowly down the length of the shaft toward the ground floor, a thought struck him about Besser. How had he known to come into the office when he did, if no noise penetrated the static screen? Probably some hidden eavesdropping gadget of Dykeman's, installed for just such an emergency.

For seconds he wondered dispiritedly what the chances were of the induction field failing, to hurl him the last seventy floors to sudden death at the bottom of the shaft, or of sudden increase in heat

from the induced fields, searing his body, turning it into a crisped blackened thing. He had heard of such accidents in the early days of the fields, before the frequency of the magneto-gravitic spectrum could be so rigidly controlled.

He was halfway across the broad plaza before Universal Building when he stopped. He stood eying the great statue of Meintrup, standing heroically holding in his hand a symbolic representation of the double peptide molecule of the longevity serum he had given the world. Huber felt a sudden overwhelming hate for the massive titanium image. He stood silently cursing the cold heroic face far above him.

The smothering depression settled on him again. There was only one way out, he realized, one end to this choking blackness that enveloped him.

He moved quickly to one of the bordering beltways, pushing through the small knot of people gossiping near the entrance accelerator. He moved quickly to a faster belt and changed direction once as he approached downtown. He didn't get off until he reached the Cafe Duval.

In the aluminum-canopied

restaurant, he found a table and ordered a scotch and water from the blue-skinned android waiter. Blank eyes stared blindly ahead as blue lips told him where he could find the vidox booth.

After he had pressed the dial setting, he waited until the screen blurred and colors swirled across its face. No image appeared, but a voice said,

"Vital statistics."

"I want the birth date of Leroy G. Sanger," he said.

After a moment the voice said, "July 24, 1846."

He checked the small notebook in his pocket to make sure that the countersign was the correct one for the date. Then he said, "Kenneth Huber."

The colors on the screen formed into an image of a blond young man with blue eyes and outstanding ears.

"Hunt, Ken?"

"That's right, Vic," Huber said. Vic Wortman was the secretary of the local hunt club he'd joined a month before in order to spy on their activities for Dykeman. By day, Wortman was a responsible Company executive; the hunt club was a secret vice for him.

"Well," he said, consulting what apparently was a file be-



low Huber's vision, "we have a couple in your test group in Universal City tonight."

He looked up.

"You're quarry this time."

"I know."

"Okay. You'll wait one hour for your contact before moving away. The weapons choice is yours."

"No restrictions," Huber said.

"No restrictions?" Wortman's voice sounded surprised. "Any choice is agreeable?"

"That's right."

"But this throws the advantage all toward your opponent, Ken. Knowledge of identity, choice of weapons. That's equivalent to signing your own death warrant."

"That's what I want."

"Yes, but—"

"Damn it, Vic," he said. "You've got to abide by the rules. Tell your man I'll be in the Cafe Duval for an hour. Let him come and kill me if he can."

## CHAPTER II

**G**OD, how he hated them all!

Huber sat watching the crowd eddy in and out among the tables of the cafe. Looking out past the aluminum canopy he could see the silver

needle of the Universal Building, knifing the night sky, surrounded by a brilliant glow. A sudden loathing for the structure and what it meant to these vacant people filled him.

Almost three-quarters of an hour had passed, he saw from his watch; more than enough time for contact. Furtively he scanned the adjacent tables, looking for his hunter.

The gray-haired man in the woolen tunic? The thin aquiline-nosed clown in the domino mask? No, he was too interested in the black-haired girl across from him. The lantern-jawed soldier with the bright purple sash across his chest and the highly rouged cheeks?

Huber paused. The gray-haired man was eying him from the corner of his eye. Maybe . . . There was no doubt of it. Huber turned abruptly and caught the man looking full at him. The contact of eyes brought a twist to his stomach. They were killer eyes.

His killer.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and started for the sidewalk in front of the cafe. The man rose slowly and followed.

A ragged undulating line of masquers blocked the street,

twisting like a many-segmented snake. Hot bodies pressed against him, and there was the heavy scent of perfume and perspiration in the air. He heard the shrill laughter of women and the heavy bull laughter of a man near at hand.

Huber felt panic, then, at what was happening to him. A sudden eddy of the crowd caught him up as he saw the man's head bobbing above the crowd. He lost him for a moment and then he found him again.

There was something very wrong, Huber realized. The man wasn't stalking him. He was closing on someone to the left. Then Huber saw her: the girl who had been with the clown in the cafe. Her eyes were wide with fear and she was moving desperately through the crowd, her hands clutching at a small leather case at her side.

Another hunt? Or could she be a decoy, planted to lure him into the open? He couldn't be sure.

He began to push toward them. He lost sight of them just as it seemed as if the man would draw abreast of the girl. He began to push violently against the crowd between them.

Then he saw her again for

an instant, and in the next he was beside her. He saw eyes wide with fright, pale cheeks outlined by jet blue-black hair, a gracefully corded neck.

"Quick," he yelled above the crowd noises, and grabbed her hand. She started to pull away.

"Hurry, before he spots you again," he said.

He forced his way through the press, roughly elbowing people aside. Pressure gave way before him and he found himself near a railed beltway.

"On here—quick!"

Then they were on, and moving away from the packed crowds. They traveled for several blocks in silence. Finally she said, "How did you know?"

"I've been a quarry myself."

"I don't know how he spotted me."

"Some of them are pretty resourceful," he said, wondering if their escape had been successful.

**W**HEN THEY finally left the beltway, the crowds were much thinner. They walked along the street for a minute until Huber saw another of the ubiquitous open air cafes.

"Come on," he said, "you need a drink."

They found a seat in the nearly deserted place and waited while another of the blue-skinned androids served them.

"Ugh," the girl shivered, staring at the tall cylindrical glass the waiter had deposited before her. "Those androids give me the creeps."

"No reason for them to," Huber said. "After all, they're not really intelligent. No ego awareness."

A loosely ordered group of men in brilliant red uniforms weaved drunkenly past the front of the cafe. Several were beating loudly on gilded snare drums.

"Look," Huber said, "how did you get mixed up in this?"

"The hunt? I don't know. A desire for something different, something exciting."

"But something like the hunt—"

"Have you ever been appalled at the utter uselessness of life?" she said. "Nothing to look forward to . . . not even death?"

He felt like a spy in disguise, suddenly called by his right name. He decided to lead her on as far as he could, without revealing anything about himself.

"By the old standards," he said, "we're living in a utopia.

Everything for the asking . . ."

"Utopia?" she said, eying the thin tube lamp in the center of the table. She reached out her hand and watched as one of several May flies which had been circling the light landed on its back.

"This city was built by the Company almost a thousand years ago. Nothing has been added since. It represents the height of the technology of that time."

"You sound like a child, disappointed because he can't have a pretty new toy every day," he said.

"There was a time," she said, "when man lived for the moment when he could break the bonds that shackled him to this one little world. What happened to that? Have we developed such a psychopathic fear of death that we're afraid to try now?"

"We don't need the neurotic desire for expansion that we had then," he said.

They sat silently, sipping their drinks. Funny, he thought. What was it Dyke-man had once said when they talked about the same thing? About an immortal culture being damned to eternal changelessness?

A culture, the medic had said, is nothing more nor less

than a social pattern being transmitted through time. And cultures change, grow or decay, because the transmission is never complete, because each succeeding generation thinks a bit differently, approaches the problems of living differently, than the one before it.

But in the immortal society of the Company, there was a perfect continuity of culture, a flawless transmission of the mores, art forms, ways of thinking; because the dominant members did not die. The damnation of too perfect communication of the pattern . . .

"Stability," he said aloud. "Isn't the stability of human culture worth something?"

He avoided her silent eyes and stared at the May flies circling the light. There were quite a number this time of year, breeding ceaselessly on the banks of the river and then flying into the city, pulled by the magnetism of the lights.

One of the flies found a precarious anchor on the side of the tube and arched its body gracefully, the long tendrils of its posterior waving lightly in the still air. The wings, he saw, were as transparent as glass, with thin veinings like lace. He reached

for it and held its gauze wings between his thumb and forefinger. He was about to crush it to the table when her hand stopped him.

"Don't," she said. "It'll be dead tomorrow anyway."

"How so?" he asked.

"They only live for a day," she said.

He opened his fingers and felt the powdery brush of beating wings as the insect gained the safety of the metal canopy above them.

"Come on," he said suddenly.

"Where?"

He laughed. "Away from the hunt. I have a friend who's a permanent complement in the city. He's giving a party at his house."

"The hunt?" she said. "I'd forgotten all about it."

She followed him into the street. He headed for a deserted avenue on the left of the cafe. There was not a soul on the street, he saw, as they started to walk. The revelry seemed to have drifted away from the area as they talked.

"You know," he said, "I'm in a hunt too. I was waiting to be killed."

"Waiting?" she said, stopping in the street.

"I was," he said, "but somehow I've suddenly changed my mind."

She made an abrupt, awkward movement. Swiftly, he reached out and pulled her to him. Her body tensed and suddenly she was struggling against him. His hand ripped open the bag at her side, spilling the contents onto the street. The vibroknife made a loud clatter.

She lunged forward, trying for the knife, and he grabbed at her. Teeth fastened in his arm and he hit her with the back of his free hand.

She reached up, trying to claw his face. Then she went limp and began to cry. Without realizing why he did it, he lowered his head and pressed his lips brutally to hers.

Fireworks burst brilliantly overhead and involuntarily he looked up.

He heard her sharp intake of breath as she looked up also. Beyond the colored blaze of lights over the city, three bright orange specks traced brilliant lines across the sky. As he watched, one of the trails began to weave erratically. The bright mark fell like a meteor to the west of the city. A second trail swerved from its path and followed the first downward.

He didn't see what happened to the third. The girl suddenly twisted in his arms

and broke free. Her swift feet carried her into the darkness. He started to follow, and it happened.

The blinding flash of blue-white light, even at that distance, wiped all details from the sky as a sponge strips chalked letters from a blackboard.

*Good Lord, he thought, someone's tried to bomb the city.*

An agony later the sound reached him. It was like the shrill crack of a monstrous rifle.

### CHAPTER III

**I**T TOOK HIM over half an hour to make his way back into the city to a 'copter terminal. Masquers stood in the streets and thronged the beltways, talking of the detonation to the west. There was an undercurrent of unrest in the crowds where before there had been only the carnival gaiety.

He found the barn-like terminal empty, and had no difficulty in summoning a helicopter from the city garages. As soon as the light on the giant call board in the concourse flashed his booth number, he took the induction shaft to the roof. He found his assigned craft, punched

the coordinates of Dyke-man's house outside the city and settled into the deep foam rubber seat. The electric motor-driven blades bit the night air and then the ram-jets on their tips ignited with a soft whoosh as the 'copter became airborne.

The city from the air was a mottled checkerboard of blue lights with fainter yellow splotches tracing the course of the Mississippi. The river faded into the darkness of rank vegetation a mile before it joined the Missouri River. The glow from the low buildings of the city was quite dim, but he could distinguish individual colors and the cobalt haze of the street lights. Here and there the red lights of flat-topped terminal buildings punctuated the softer shades. In the geometrical center of the city, the Universal Building stabbed a brilliant finger into the sky.

Universal City; not the capital of the world. That was in the Great Smokies, near the ruins of atom-blasted Asheville, Tennessee. No, not the capital, but certainly the most important city in a very small world.

For after the war of extinction, the world had shrunk alarmingly. The forces un-

leashed in that last great conflict had seared the face of a once fertile earth. Clouds of poisonous isotopes rolling across the land; ravenous hordes of insects destroying crops and infecting livestock and men with a thousand virulences; the massed toxic knowledge of a humanity gone insane, poisoning whole cities, turning the humus of the fields into a poisonous dirt that seared the skin from the bone at a touch; all these had wasted great stretches of the earth's surface, making it forever unfit for man.

In that nightmare of killing, man himself had almost become extinct. The sheer destructiveness of the war had reduced man's physical technology to the point where he could no longer wage war. That would have been the end of it—if horror hadn't followed horror.

The Gasping Sickness. No one knew where it originated. Some said in the last of the laboratories in Camp Dietrich or in the Grovensworth Laboratories in Britain or in the Lubinov Plants in the Don Valley. Perhaps it was a wild mutation. But in a few short months it threatened to destroy what was left of humanity.

It was that fantastic re-

cluse, that impossible buckshot biochemist, Meintrup, who found the answer. Not by any carefully planned work, but by the application of a complex series of peptides and near-proteins which he had been producing in unpredictable profusion throughout the war. It just happened that one of the protein fragments he'd learned to synthesize combined with the virus molecule, attached itself to the virulent molecule almost point for point like an enzyme, and split it into harmless fragments.

The Gaspings Sickness was over—just like that.

The U.N. had fallen, of course, at the outset of the war, but there was a new organization, the World Federation of States. The WFS had come into being in an attempt to deal with the impossible quarantine problems, the outrageous sanitation problems, the thousand and one unsolvable problems that were the common heritage of the War of Extermination. It had power, given to it freely in panic, and this time the WFS held on to that power.

They didn't treat Meintrup fairly, though. They said, "Thank you," of course, "but your work is too sloppy. We have more competent men,



who keep nice, neat notebooks, who can predict within a reasonable margin what will happen next."

That was the basic philosophy of the new safe and sane age arising. After a nightmare of uncertainty came the worship of predictability, the distrust of pure chance.

Meintrup had modified the vaccine by this time. The original molecule, he found, would condense with itself, form a double chain with unusual properties.

So, he went to the people who still had money, the owners of the indestructible resources like oil, coal, iron, tin, bauxite. They formed the Universal Insurance Company.

There was an almost manic fear of death everywhere. The Company offered immortality on the installment plan, in exchange for the assignment of a certain percentage of the insured's earnings. At first they had paid on accidental deaths, but these had decreased almost exponentially from year to year as the Company moved to remake the narrow world into a safe warm womb. Suicides went up for a while, but the invention of the heterodyne field solved that problem.

In half a decade, Universal

Insurance was a monolithic financial power. Within a decade, the WFS was under the control of the Company.

The Compulsory Longevity Act came next. No one objected—at least not seriously. There was some abortive violence, but no one talked about that—not even the ones who were in Universal City when it was bombed. One could still see a few abandoned missile and anti-aircraft emplacements on the islands in the Mississippi, but few people remembered what they were for.

The Company literally owned the world.

It did not govern. That would have been contrary to the philosophy of the century which placed such value on human freedom. But the Company dealt more intimately with the daily lives of the world's people than did the legislature of the WFS, assembled in the mountains of Asheville.

For the Company owned the most precious commodity in the world: everlasting life.

**A** GREEN LIGHT glowed suddenly on the dash of the 'copper, and Huber snapped from his reverie. The light was a signal that the ship's auto-



pilot had taken over from the central dispatch machines. He leaned forward with new decision and jabbed the canceling button, erasing the coordinates of Dyke's house.

Then he dialed the coordinates of a spot twenty miles west. A spot near which the bright speck in the sky must have landed.

Mechanisms behind the dash muttered softly for a second, and then the commo screen in the dash glowed. The expressionless blue face of the android dispatcher resolved itself. Behind him, Huber saw the broad windows of the city's master dispatch room and through them the sprawling android sheds on the western edge of the city.

"What coordinates, please?" the blue lips said.

Huber repeated the coordinates he had dialed.

"I'm sorry, sir. That area is restricted tonight."

"Why?" he demanded.

"I don't have that information. All traffic is to be rerouted around the area. Choose an alternate destination please."

"Switch me to manual," he ordered.

"I'm sorry," the android said. A blue hand appeared briefly in the screen and punched a cryptic pattern on

the control panel before it. There was something odd about the hand, but Huber couldn't decide what it was.

"Manual control is temporarily suspended for all units. Choose an alternate destination, please."

For a moment there was an expression on the blue face. Impatience? Of course not, Huber decided.

"That's complete nonsense," he said. "Do as you're ordered."

There was no doubt of the expression now.

"Manual is suspended on your unit. Let me have your Company policy number, please."

"Damn it—"

"Give me your policy number, please."

Huber gave it and said, "Switch me to your human supervisor."

"Of course."

A blue hand came forward, paused indecisively, then touched a switch on the complex console.

In the next instant, Huber smelled burning insulation.

Above his head the rotors began to vibrate screechingly. Huber felt the jolt as they flew apart and the 'copter bucked sickeningly.

It began its long plunge into the river far below.

## CHAPTER IV

**T**HE HELICOPTER hit the water with a shudder. The interior lights blinked out. For an instant, nothing happened; then water was pouring in upon Huber.

He beat his way to the door as the water reached his chest. He gulped air, felt the water close over his head, and then he was frantically clawing at the exit hatch.

He was drowning. He saw with sudden clarity that he would die. And he did not want to die.

A distant part of his mind laughed hysterically at his panic. The man who had tried to kill himself, the man who had waited calmly for the death blow of a hunt, and now he didn't want to die.

The latch gave then and he pushed out. He held the stale air in his lungs tightly, feeling the numbing pressure of the water as he shot up through the black depths. Something was happening to his viscera and he knew he was going to be violently ill.

His head broke water and he struggled to suck air into his paralyzed lungs. He couldn't breath. Tight cramps lanced his abdomen. Somehow he had found the presence of mind to shed his shoes

and now he tried to free himself from the sagging costume he wore. The seams parted at his touch and cold water touched bare skin.

Before he fully understood what he was doing he raised the costume from the water and brought it down again violently. The effort submerged his head and he came up coughing. But the sudden movement had inflated the wet cloth. He held tightly to the leg and sleeve openings, trapping the air inside the sodden fabric.

The current was carrying him along swiftly. He tried to kick against it, but his muscles were knotted. He knew he was going to be sick from the effect of the pressure and the food and liquor he'd consumed.

At first he didn't hear the motor. The boat was almost upon him before he saw the light stabbing out over the water. He yelled, and filled his lungs to yell again.

Then he saw the heavy shape of a cruiser nosing toward him, and in the next instant rough hands were pulling him aboard.

A light flashed in his face and a familiar voice said, "Of all the damned fish to catch tonight!"

"Vic!" Huber gasped.

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

"A good question, and one you can answer too. But let's get you inside and into some dry clothes."

While he dried himself in the small cabin and donned the set of work denims Vic Wortman gave him, Huber felt the boat change direction.

"Damnedest way for a hunt to end," Wortman said.

"It wasn't the hunt," Huber said. "What are you doing out here? You haven't told me."

"Being a hunt master's just a hobby, you know. My main job is with the Company."

"Meaning?"

"Well, it won't hurt to tell you, I guess. We're going out to Eldon's Island. I have orders from the Director to man the Orestes installations there."

"Orestes?"

"Ground - to - air missiles. Looks like somebody's expecting unfriendly visitors from the air tonight."

Huber followed Wortman onto the darkened deck. The man gave low orders in the dark and Huber waited.

Finally he said, "Vic, what's going on? What blew up out there tonight?"

"Search me. Looked like a bomb."

"Who'd try to bomb Universal City?"

"Well, it's been tried before. Why do you think they built this anti-aircraft installation we're going to man?"

"But that was centuries ago."

"I know. It sounds ridiculous that anyone would want to destroy the city. One thing, though, you forget. . . ."

"Yes?"

"The ones who dropped those bombs two centuries ago are probably still alive."

**H**E LEFT Huber by the cabin door and walked to the bow. Huber stood waiting silently. All at once he felt as if he were being pushed into something without his consent.

The thing was too unreal, too coincidental. The series of events affecting him personally: the final confirmation of his future death, the attempt to jump out of the window, the girl, the explosion to the west, the failure of the 'copter, and Wortman's too convenient arrival and too pat explanation.

All seemingly disconnected events. Yet . . . He shivered in the coolness of the river breezes. There seemed to be no logical connection. Yet

there was too much happening. He'd better watch his step with Wortman, he decided. The man was obviously a neurotic. How else explain his morbid interest in the hunts, his organizing a hunt club himself?

Huber moved forward as the cruiser slackened its speed. Their direction changed slightly, and then the motors stilled. He saw the spotlight outlining a ragged fringe of trees and a half-decayed dock. One of the men jumped onto the dock and secured a mooring line.

Then Wortman was on the dock, giving quick orders. Huber steadied himself by the bow and jumped across.

"Look," he told Wortman, "I've got to talk to you."

"Later, Ken."

"Now."

"Later. There's a 'copter due to pick me up in another ten minutes. I've got to get this operation going."

Huber watched the men move out. There were gleams of individual lights in the darkness. He saw the dim shapes of some type of concrete construction, and heard the sound of metal sliding on metal. Someone shouted an order, and muffled motors whirred. Dim shapes of steel rose slowly to be silhouetted

against the glow of the horizon and the lower silhouettes of the trees.

The Orestes, he thought. Still operable after all these years? Someone had been preparing for tonight.

He heard the distant beat of 'copter vanes. As he listened they came closer, and a bright beam of light lanced the night sky. Moments later the heavy craft lowered itself onto the bank before the dock.

Wortman came running. As he passed Huber, he said, "Come on."

A man was descending from the aircraft. As he stepped into the light, Huber recognized Dykeman's assistant, Besser.

"Who the hell told you to come out here?" the thin man rasped. For a moment Huber thought he was being addressed.

"The Director 'vised me," Wortman snapped. "Told me to contact you and hitch a ride."

Besser swore softly. "All right, get in."

"Come on, Ken," Wortman called.

"Who's that?" Besser demanded.

"Ken Huber."

"That's out. I don't have any orders on him."

"I do."

"Dykeman is senior in charge until the Director takes over. He specifically said no personnel but those from city administration."

"I told you. Director's orders."

Besser swore again.

"All right. Get in and make it quick."

Huber followed Wortman into the 'copter and took one of the rear seats. Besser settled into the pilot's seat and flipped the manual switch. The blades bit air.

"What's the deal?" Huber demanded. "Where are we going?"

"Out where that thing blew up," Wortman said.

"Thing?"

"He doesn't know," Besser yelled angrily above the motors.

"What thing?" Huber insisted. "A bomb?"

"You may as well know, since you'll see it anyway," Besser yelled. "It wasn't a bomb. It was a spaceship."

Huber gaped. The thin man laughed bitterly.

"Don't look at me as if I've gone off my rocker. It's a spaceship, all right." His voice was shrill above the noise of their flight. "A spaceship, by damn—complete with crew."

"THE FIRST ONE crashed and blew up," Besser yelled above the vibration of the rotor. "The blast caught the second and threw it out of control."

Etched in the blaze of light below, Huber could see the clumsy shapes of at least a dozen twin-rotor disaster craft, their oversize fuel tanks bulging like twin cankers on the stem of a reed, drawn into a tight landing pattern. The shock wave from the explosion had stripped the area of the scrub oak and pine that normally blanketed the plain west of the city. At the extreme boundaries of the circle of disaster, he could see occasional pines still rooted, but they were twisted and ragged looking, and leaned at sharp angles from the center of the bare circle.

He counted fourteen twin search beams on the periphery of the area. Their bright arcs had been directed parallel to the ground. The whole area had a coarse granular appearance as though some monstrous rake had churned the earth in concentric circles from the epicenter. There was an area of nearly a hundred yards in diameter in the center of the blast that glistened

like the surface of a frozen lake.

"That must be where the fireball touched the ground," Wortman said excitedly.

Besser pointed to the east. "And that's where the second one came in. It must have hit a half mile outside the circle and then torn a path through the trees."

"Just like a stone skipping across a pond," Huber yelled.

"Damned hard pond," Wortman laughed, "and a damned big stone."

The wreckage of the second ship had strewn itself across the open area under the lights in a long narrow path. The ship had broken into three distinct sections, and Huber saw what he guessed must be the tail section by the battered rocket tubes.

Besser had switched to manual again and was guiding the ship into a landing near the glazed area.

"What about radiation?" Wortman asked.

"An android crew checked first thing. Not a milliroentgen above normal background. Nothing in the cloud either."

"Whoever heard of a blast that size without a neutron flux?" Huber demanded.

"Big medicine," Wortman said in an awed voice.

As they alighted, a mud-spattered mechanical centipede came churning across the soft ground from the forward section, dust and clods of dirt spurting from under its many splayed wheels. A conventional gyro-balanced beetle, Huber saw, could not possibly have navigated the uneven terrain. The vehicle ground to a stop near them with a muffled whine of transmissions, and Dykeman, who shared the front seat with an android driver, leaned out.

"Besser," he yelled, "who's that with you?"

"Ken Huber and Vic Wortman."

"Damn it, I told you not to bring any outsiders."

"Director sent me in, Dyke," Wortman said, moving toward the vehicle. "Told me to pick up Ken and bring him along."

That's an outright lie, Huber thought. It confirmed his doubts about Wortman. Something was radically wrong here.

"What's the situation look like?" Besser asked.

"Don't know. I was just heading for the forward section when you landed. I decided to come back and see who it was."

"Well, let's go, then," Wortman said.

"That area's off limits to you both," Dykeman said, staring at them. "And don't tell me you have any other authorization. I'm the final judge in questions of possible radiation."

"But Besser said—" Huber began.

"Never mind what Besser said. You both stay here. That's an order."

Before either could reply, Besser had mounted to the rear seat and Dykeman said, "Take off."

"Bring me a picture of your little green men," Wortman said sardonically. Dykeman ignored him, but Besser turned, his sunken eyes burning in the sallow face.

"You'd make a joke out of your mother's funeral," he said.

The centipede started with a jolt and raced back toward the forward section.

"Look, there's something I want to know," Huber said.

"Know how to run a 'pede?" Wortman demanded.

"Yes, but—"

"I saw one parked on the far side of the landing area as we came in. What say we take a look at that rear section?"

Huber followed him at a trot.

"Dykeman said to stay here," he panted.

"The hell with what Dyke says," Wortman snapped, climbing over the wheels of the parked vehicle and into the passenger seat.

Huber mounted beside him and started the motor. The thing snarled softly as his foot engaged the transmission and he threw the vehicle forward.

"What's Dykeman doing here?" he demanded as he swerved to avoid a massive piece of torn metal.

"Officially in charge of field operations. Only a few of the regular complement are on hand on Carnival night. Rest have left for the weekend."

"What about the radiation?"

"Don't be silly. Think *he'd* go in unless it were safe?"

**A**S THEY approached the rear section with its massive rocket tubes, the metal fragments became more profuse, and Huber needed all of his attention to avoid them. The initial impact of the ship had stripped all the airfoils from the craft; and connecting girders and the metal outer skin had crumbled from the frame with each glancing impact to spread huge pieces of debris over the path of the ship.

He hadn't realized just how large the motor section was until they drew up beside it and he looked up to see the gouged and scarred wall curve upward above them and out over their vehicle. A gaping hole in the side, apparently the result of torchwork by one of the android disaster crew, was close enough for them to reach from the centipede. Huber crawled through and leaned out to help Wortman, who came up puffing and blowing. He was carrying a hand lantern.

Huber took the light from him and led the way forward. The section seemed to be divided into the short passage into which they had gained entry and two much larger chambers, braced and buttressed against the thrust of the motors, through which branching catwalks led.

Huber paused to eye several of the levers, attached to a complex of pipes resembling a hydraulic system.

"One thing sure," he said, "our little green men have only four fingers, if you can call them that."

"How so?" demanded Wortman.

"By the various controls. They're designed to be grasped by three fingers and an opposable thumb. About hu-

man height too, I'd say, though what they look like Dykeman will tell us."

He began to inspect the massive tanks that filled the first compartment. After a long while, he said, "These damned things can't be all reaction mass. Where's the fuel?"

He kneeled and opened a petcock on the massive pipe leading from one of the tanks. Clear liquid gushed out. He checked the flow with a tug and smelled the liquid. Finally he tasted it.

"Here," he offered Wortman.

Wortman tasted a drop.

"Salt!"

"That's right. Weak saline."

"But what about fuel?"

"I've got a crazy idea, there. Notice there's no shielding worth the name anywhere in this section."

He started through to the second chamber. "I want to check below," Wortman said, lowering himself slowly on a ladder.

It was fifteen minutes before he re-joined Huber.

"Find anything?" he asked.

"Looks like my crazy idea was right. Our aliens know how to handle a controlled sodium fusion reaction."

"Now, look," Wortman protested. "Even I know enough



about nuclear physics to know that is impossible."

"Take my word for it," Huber said. "Our little green men can do the impossible. And they don't get any hard radiation from the reaction. They dissolve the fuel right in the reaction mass, salt in water, and get heat and a few stray betas that even a sheet of tinfoil would stop."

"What about the motor itself. Can we duplicate it?"

"I think so. The secret seems to be in a little gadget in the rear of the assembly that sends a stream of alphas from a hunk of polonium into the reaction mass and then generates some sort of harmonic field around the chamber. It looks simple, but I'll be damned if I see how they shake up a few sodium atoms and a couple of alpha particles and get energy out of it."

"Any idea how much thrust?"

"How much do you think this hulk weighs?"

"Well . . ."

Huber stamped on the deck. It rang hollowly.

"Plain ordinary steel," he said. "Those motors have enough thrust to raise and maneuver a five-hundred-yard long vessel of solid steel."

"If we can unravel those motors," Wortman said, "it

means we've got space flight dumped right into our lap."

"There's more."

Huber raised the lantern and hooked it on a ragged piece of metal that curled from one wall. The metal wall plates were warped and buckled as though the major impact of striking had been concentrated at this point. The far end of the spacious compartment was filled with a bewildering mass of complex helices and gleaming silver bus bars a foot thick. Dropping away on either side of the catwalk that ran through the center of the compartment was a complex instrument panel with what were obviously acceleration couches positioned at several spots on its face. The whole thing now leaned crazily, its surface scored as though with a giant file.

"That's not the motor," Wortman whispered.

"No. It looks something like those electro-gravitic generators Chang in Lima was playing with fifty years ago when he developed the induction field. If there's one competent physicist on the continent, you'd better get him out here. This thing is beyond me."

"What is it?"

Huber paused in indecision.

"You should ask what is it, *and*"—he pointed at the acceleration couches before the great board—"where are the technicians who ran it? This thing needs a lot of controlling."

"All right, give," Wortman demanded.

Huber gestured silently, took the lantern, and led him along the catwalk toward the deep well that housed the control board. He directed his light into the depths.

"Looks like something's been burned down there."

"That's right," Huber said. "Something—don't ask me what—literally burned down the crew. Something piled them, unconscious or dead, down there and deliberately tried to reduce them to ashes."

"Who—"

"As for your other question," Huber said, feeling suddenly as if he were going to strangle on the words, "I think this damned thing is an interstellar drive."

## CHAPTER VI

THE CENTIPEDE returned them to the landing area just as Dykeman arrived from the forward stage. The chubby medic climbed from his vehicle and strode purpose-

fully toward them as they dismounted.

"I thought I told you to stay here," he said.

"We figured there'd be no danger," Wortman said.

"That motor section could be hot as blazes," the medic said with a worried frown.

"Well, it's too late to worry now," Huber said. "Find anything in the forward section?"

"Nothing," Dykeman said, shaking his head. "Not a sign of anyone or anything. Controls pretty badly smashed up, but not a blood spot or anything that would pass for one."

Huber told him what they had found.

"That doesn't sound reasonable," Dykeman said.

"Where's Besser?" Wortman demanded.

"Throwing up a picket line around the area. We brought in a detachment of androids and armed them."

"What are you afraid of?" Huber wanted to know.

"Did it ever occur to you," Dykeman said, "that our hypothetical aliens didn't intend to give us a present of this ship? That they might not want us out there where they come from? That they might try to get in and destroy this wreck?"

"From the ground?"

"Either way," the medic said, "we've got to be prepared until we can get someone in here who understands this thing."

Huber was about to say something about the drives he'd seen when Dykeman looked up and said,

"It's about time."

Brilliant landing lights suddenly flicked on overhead and Huber looked up to see a 'copter lowering toward them.

"Look," Wortman said, "I'm going out with Besser. Maybe I can help."

"Better stay here," Dykeman said. "That's the Director's ship."

"I'll be back," Wortman said. Before the medic could answer, Wortman had climbed up beside Dykeman's driver and the centipede was rocketing away toward the forward section.

"Damned flighty idiot," Dykeman said; and Huber wondered if Dykeman had yet seen Wortman's name on the list of hunt clubs he'd given him.

The 'copter settled heavily and the door flew open even before the blades ceased revolving.

A tall man with broad shoulders and a thick corded neck leaped down. In the light from the spots, Huber



saw that his hair was tinged with gray. He wondered how old he must be. Very few of the present generation showed any sign of aging.

Dykeman started forward as the man turned to lend assistance to someone behind him. As they stepped into the light, Huber moved forward. With a start, he recognized the second figure.

It was the girl from the hunt club.

**“W**HAT DOES it look like?” the man was saying as he drew up with them.

“You know Huber?” Dykeman said.

“No, I don’t,” the man said.

“But Wortman said—”

“I suggested he be brought along,” the girl said.

“I wish you’d keep me notified of these things, Loira,” Dykeman said, his voice showing annoyance.

“I’m Robert Frey,” the tall graying man said.

Huber shook the Director’s hand as Dykeman said, “We haven’t found a soul aboard. I think the ship’s robot-controlled.”

“I don’t think so,” Huber said. He was eying the girl, Loira, gauging her reaction. She seemed completely at her ease, though there was no

doubt that she knew him. And, he thought, she knew of Wortman’s lies on his behalf. Which meant—

“What are you talking about?” Dykeman demanded.

“There’s a pile of bodies in the motor section. Pretty badly charred, but that’s what they are.”

He described what he and Wortman had discovered.

“This is too pat,” the Director said through compressed lips. “I don’t like the looks of it.”

“We’ve had the Orestes stations manned,” Loira said.

“Why, in heaven’s name?” Dykeman said.

“There’s still one of those ships loose,” the Director said as they walked toward the other waiting centipede. “It’s a bet,” the Director continued, “that those people, whoever they are, didn’t intend to make us a present of their drive. They probably don’t want us out there.” He waved at the stars overhead.

“I don’t understand this,” Huber said. “Of all the areas on the continent without a single observer, why did this flight appear over Universal City? And during a test period? There’s never been a report before of such ships and now, without warning, one blows up over the city

and drops a radically new engine within walking distance."

"Perhaps they *wanted* us to get the motor," Frey said.

"Would they destroy two valuable ships?" Loira said.

"Maybe the crew was composed of androids," the Director said.

"No, it just doesn't make sense," Huber said.

"Did you see the motors?" Loira asked.

He nodded.

Dykeman looked at him, his eyes wide.

"Is there anything in there that could interfere with radio reception?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"All radio transmission went out about the time the ships were over the city," the Director said. "There was a burst of untuned radiation that knocked out reception all over the hemisphere."

"Has that ever happened before?"

Dykeman and the Director exchanged glances.

"Yes," the Director said at last. "A number of times in the last ten years. We've localized its source in the Hudson Bay Area."

"But there's nothing up there," Dykeman said. "Nothing but the Bureau of Forestry's pulp reserves."

"I can't tell you about what those motors would do," Huber said.

"I want to see that control section," the Director said. "There may be star maps, manuals."

Dykeman led the way to the centipede. Huber grabbed the girl by the arm.

"Stay here," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Loira," the Director said over his shoulder, "get on the radio and check with Ashville on those marines they're sending up."

"No excuse now," Huber said, grinning coldly.

They watched the centipede scurry off.

"All right," Huber said. "Give."

"Give what?"

"You have some explaining to do. Like that phony hunt. I'm pretty well convinced you were leading me into a trap."

"You were being hunted, by the man in the soldier's costume," she said. "I chose the first way I thought of to get you away from there."

"What happened to him?"

She shrugged. "I had to dispose of him."

He grabbed her fiercely, his fingers digging into her shoulders. She bore the pressure without wincing.

"All right, just who are

you?" he demanded. "What are you? What have you got to do with Wortman?"

"I can't tell you that," she said, "not yet."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm tired of being maneuvered. You aren't going to push me around any more."

"Isn't it enough that we've saved your life three times?"

"Twice—if you really did," he said, "and don't evade the issue."

"We're working very hard to a particular goal," she said.

"We . . . we? What kind of paranoid nonsense is this?"

"How can I possibly answer your questions when you won't listen?" she demanded. She pulled roughly away and started to walk toward the helicopter. He caught up with her, grasped her arm, and forced her to face him.

"I can't tell you now," she said. "Believe me, part of that is simply because you aren't prepared to accept the explanation and . . ."

She paused in indecision.

"Believe me, trust me. You've assumed an importance in certain plans, an importance by your mere existence."

"You expect me to trust you blindly?"

"Yes," she said. She fumbled in the pocket of the

blouse she wore. Her hand appeared with a stoppered vial.

"This will answer one question in due time."

He unstoppered the vial and sniffed.

"Acetone."

"That's right."

"But—"

"You'll know when to use it."

He started to say something else when suddenly a sharp crack knifed the air. Several shots sounded behind them.

He turned as the area to the rear was plunged in darkness.

"Someone's shot out the spots," he yelled.

In the darkness far down the disaster lane, the night erupted in bright flashes of light. The high nervous chatter of automatic weapons broke the stillness.

## CHAPTER VII

HE WAS RUNNING forward then, Loira close behind him. Silently he cursed when he realized that there was no way to get closer to the scene of action. He was turning to hunt for another centipede when he heard the sound of roaring motors. A centipede suddenly broke into the lighted area and made for his position.

The machine roared to a stop and Wortman jumped from the seat and made for the Director's helicopter.

"Vic!" Huber yelled.

The man stopped and turned.

"Get down there and help," he yelled. "There's a sub-machine gun in the seat of the 'pede."

"Where are you going?"

"This is just a distraction here," he yelled. "Listen."

In the distance Huber heard muffled explosions. A red light bloomed briefly in the distant sky.

"The Orestes stations," he said.

"The bastards must have had men planted in the crew I left there," Vic said and turned to the 'copter.

A moment later the machine was off the ground.

"Stay here," Huber yelled at Loira, and threw in the 'pede's transmission. A moment later he was speeding into the area beyond the lights.

The firing had died down, but he crouched low, using the metal of the cabin to protect himself. He pulled the machine up sharply, grabbed the gun on the seat beside him and leaped to the ground.

He almost stumbled over a fallen body. His hand en-

countered the coarse cloth of an android uniform. Then he began to move forward.

Someone moved in to his left. "Who is it?" he yelled.

"Put down that gun and get out of here." It was Besser's voice.

The shooting stopped suddenly and he stood waiting for Besser to approach. A light suddenly stabbed out from one of the extinguished spotlights.

"Get that damned thing off," he yelled. "The third ship must be in the area."

"You're crazy," Besser said.

Huber brought up the machine gun and loosed a blast at the light. It faded with a sputter. Besser began to swear.

In the next instant a growing hiss filled the air.

"Get down," Huber yelled, "it's coming in."

The hiss grew to an ear-splitting roar. He looked up and saw a heavy shape occult the stars. It was moving with an agonizing slowness. Then he saw the helicopter.

It was coming in low. There was no doubt of its purpose.

"He's going to ram it," Besser yelled.

"He can't bring that thing down," Huber said.

"Like hell he can't," Besser

said and hit the ground at Huber's feet.

The hissing suddenly rose in pitch. The red exhaust of the great ship curved sharply.

"He's driving it off," Huber yelled.

It was true. Incredibly true. The great ship nosed up sharply to avoid the slower 'copter. The red exhaust bent abruptly and the ship was rising vertically. Higher and higher, gaining speed. And then it was gone.

"There's the weakness," he said. "They can't handle the thing in an atmosphere. Even a 'copter will throw them off."

He helped Besser up.

"Who was it?" Besser demanded.

"Wortman."

"I thought so."

"What happened out here?" Huber demanded.

With a sputter another of the blanked spots nearby glowed and white light illuminated the area.

"I don't know," Besser said. "I wasn't here when it started. Whoever they were, they escaped back into the woods."

**H**E WALKED BACK toward the centipede in which Huber had come. Huber looked down at the crumpled form of the

android over which he had stumbled. There was something odd about the outstretched hand. Then he remembered the hand of the android dispatcher, the one he had talked to before his helicopter plunged into the Mississippi.

And then he had it.

The hand.

He grabbed the limp arm and held it up for a better look. The little finger on the hand was circled by a thin but definite line of darker blue. Scar tissue, he thought. Quickly, he inspected the other hand. It was the same way.

"Come on," Besser said, walking back to where he was standing. "It's only a hunk of meat."

"Wait a minute," Huber growled.

He felt in his pocket, searching for the vial Loira had given him. Quickly he unstopped it and secured a handkerchief from his other pocket. He moistened the cloth from the bottle, leaned down, and began to scrub it across the forehead of the dead android.

"What the hell are you doing?" Besser demanded.

"Take a look," Huber said.

He held up the handkerchief. It was stained a deep



blue. At his feet the dead android stared up glassily. The blue skin about the forehead was almost white.

"My God," Besser said.

"Is this one of yours?" Huber demanded.

"Who knows? They all look alike. It's obvious why he was planted here."

"That isn't all that's obvious," Huber said. He told Besser about the android dispatcher. "They must have agents in key positions everywhere."

"Let's get back," the man said. For the first time his cold possession seemed to have deserted him.

They mounted the centipede and Huber turned the machine towards the landing area. Charging across the broken terrain, he glanced quickly at Besser. The man's face was abnormally white. He was biting his lower lip fiercely.

The Director's helicopter had landed, Huber saw. He brought the centipede to a halt and they dismounted and walked toward it. Loira was standing outside, looking into the ship.

As they walked up beside her, Dykeman thrust his head out of the hatch. Huber could hear the Director's voice saying something. Talking on

the radio, Huber decided.

Dykeman jumped to the ground.

"Dyke," Huber said, "you've got to get a crew out to the android sheds—"

The Director suddenly appeared in the hatch.

"We're doing that now. I hope it isn't too late."

"What's wrong?"

The Director's face was strained in the diffused light.

"There was another burst of radiation about the time the ship came over. Now City Communication's slave stations are off the air. All of the city's public 'copters are grounded. That means there's nothing but local communication within the immediate area. No 'copters but administrative ones like this. Every other one is city-dispatched on tight beam."

"That means . . ."

"That Universal City is effectively sealed off from the outside world," Loira said breathlessly.

"It's as simple as that," the Director said. "All Company installations are centralized in the Administration area. The android sheds too. Whoever the aliens are, they hold it now—and the life of the city along with it."

"Where's Wortman?" Huber demanded.

"I don't know," the Director said.

"What do you mean?"

"The 'copter came down on autopilot. There was no one in it. Nothing but . . ."

He motioned Huber forward and stood aside.

Huber put his head through the hatch. The overhead lights were on. For a moment he saw nothing. Then his eyes saw the mound of cloth, kicked carelessly into the corner.

A tunic and sandals.

The tunic Wortman had been wearing.

### CHAPTER VIII

"**T**HEY'RE holed up in the Administration building," the balding young man named Johnson said. "We thought they were androids."

The three of them, Johnson, Dykeman and Huber, lay on the cold ground, looking toward the central Administration building that towered above the low barn-like android sheds. A wide expanse of concrete intervened. The whole compound was brightly lighted, with only the terraced lawns bordering the Administration building in shadow.

"How many are there?" Huber asked.

"Not more than five. They

weren't expecting us to take such quick action."

"What about the androids?"

"That's the funny thing. The aliens have done something to them. They're in a coma, everyone stacked like cordwood in their bunks."

"Look," Dykeman said, "it's two more hours 'til sunrise, when the test group will start to leave the city. We've got to get this cleaned up."

"What's in the central tower?" Huber demanded.

"Central control for 'copter dispatch. The automatic devices are in the basement."

"Then, while they control the tower, no 'copter keyed to the city dispatch units can move."

"And five men can hold that place for days," Dykeman said.

"Do we have any beetles?" Huber asked.

"Eight," Johnson said.

"They'd pick you off in a minute from those windows," Dykeman protested.

"Can you cut off the lights in the compound?"

"We can cut the cables from the main power station," Johnson said. "We've already dug them up at the terminal box."

"Good. Give me seven drivers for those beetles. Then

post a man to watch for my signal on the lights."

"I'm coming with you," Dykeman said.

Johnson disappeared, and a moment later motors began to throb to their rear.

Huber moved back toward the noise, Dykeman bringing up the rear. The beetles were drawn into a tight group. The gyro of one, Huber noted, must be off balance from the low regular beat in the otherwise even tone of the motor.

"My man's in position," Johnson said as they approached.

He handed Huber a heavy 16-mm pistol.

"Give us time enough to get into the compound," Huber said. "Have the other drivers follow, well spread out. We'll take the main entrance. Its doors are big and all glass. They'll have a time holding those broad stairs with no cover at the top."

He ran for one of the unoccupied beetles as Johnson passed instructions to the small group of drivers. He dropped into the bucket seat of the beetle as Dykeman climbed in.

The beetle started with a spurt as the other vehicles fanned out. He heard the tires buzz on the pavement. He twisted the tiller and the

beetle turned sharply around the corner of a shed. Dykeman was breathing hoarsely beside him.

Then they were on the compound, speeding for the Administration building. All the lights in the compound went suddenly dark. He heard the sound of the other beetles behind him.

They were still a hundred yards from the shadowed front of the building when he heard shouts. He glanced to his left and saw dull red flames.

"They've got something that's burning out the motors of the beetles," Dykeman yelled above the wind.

"They haven't got us yet," Huber yelled, and toed the accelerator.

**T**HE BEETLE lurched for a moment and then sped up the shallow incline toward the great glass doors. He slammed the brake pedal hard and jumped from the vehicle. He heard Dykeman jump from the other side with a grunt.

The glass doors were open to the night air and they plunged through to the darkened interior at a crouch. Huber's toe found the first step of the broad stairs and he almost stumbled.

There was no sound, only their heavy breathing. They raced silently up the stairs. With each step Huber expected to be met with fire. Then they were in the broad hall that stretched the length of the first floor.

"No sign of them," Dykeman panted.

"Try the tower," Huber said.

"We may walk into a trap."

"Any better idea?"

The curving escalator to the tower was silent. Around the bend of the immobile stairs, Huber saw a glow of light from the tower room.

There was no sound.

Cautiously he lowered his body to the floor and stuck his pistol carefully around the corner. He began to pump round after round against the opposite wall. He heard the high whine of ricocheting 16-mm slugs.

"Come on," he yelled.

He jumped to his feet and rounded the corner on a run.

The room was empty.

The only evidence that anyone had been there was the disorder of smashed dispatch panels and hacked cables leading into the floor.

"Now what?" Dykeman demanded.

"They're still one jump ahead unless—"

He whirled on the medic.

"What about that man, Johnson? Do you trust him? This looks phony."

Dykeman opened his mouth to answer. His pudgy face suddenly lost all color in the blinding light that poured through the broad windows of the dispatch room.

Huber threw himself at the medic. They fell to the floor and rolled under the dispatcher's desk.

In the next instant, the broad windows of the tower erupted in flying daggers. Glass tinkled, then there was silence. A moment later the tower rocked in the grip of the backblast.

Huber sprang to his feet and ran to the window. It looked like a hungry mouth with endless glittering teeth. He looked out toward the wreck area, feeling sick.

"The Director, Loira, Bes-ser . . ." Dykeman breathed. "It must have got them all."

"And the ship . . ." Huber said. The sense of loss was overpowering.

"That's the end of any space-flight dream," Dykeman said wearily.

"No, it isn't," Huber said fiercely. "Maybe we've lost the star drive." He looked toward the cloud that was unfolding like some evil flower

against the horizon's glow. "But I can still duplicate their planetary drive," he finished.

"I was afraid of that," Dykeman said behind him.

He started to turn. The room suddenly dissolved in splinters of pain, and blackness fell on him in red-shot, choking folds.

## CHAPTER IX

CONSCIOUSNESS came briefly as if someone had pulled a switch. It was a flickering awareness in which he felt cold metal under his body. A shrill rush of air filled his ears and for a moment he thought he was in a 'copter. Then he realized that no 'copter was capable of such speed. He opened his eyes and saw amber lights and gleaming metal through a dancing haze. Then a rush of nausea swept over him and he plunged again into an anesthetic darkness.

When he was again fully conscious, he found that the hard metal surface had been replaced by the softness of foam plastic. He tried to turn on his side and discovered that his hands were bound securely in front of him. His legs were tied, too.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Ken," a voice said and he

turned his head. Dykeman was sitting on the edge of the relaxer on which he lay. His eyes traveled briefly around the room, noting soft recessed lights, a broad draped window.

"That's right," Dykeman said. "We're at my house."

"Cut the hearts and flowers," Besser said, stepping into his line of vision. "I don't see why you bothered to bring him here. He doesn't know any more about the girl and her organization than we do."

"I thought you—" Huber began.

"Don't be stupid," Besser sneered. "I planted the bomb in the wrecked ship. Think I'd stay around until it went off?"

"You murdering bastard," Huber said and began to struggle.

"No use struggling, Ken," Dykeman said tiredly. "You won't be hurt if you cooperate."

Huber sank back tiredly. "I should have realized that only you could have destroyed those bodies on the ship," he said. "But how do I fit into your little rat race?"

"You're the source of the rat race," Dykeman said. "Your very existence has built this operation into a comedy of errors. Now, we

have to do certain things which I wish weren't necessary. . . ."

He spread his hands. "Ken, we're not a bunch of inhuman monsters, even by your standards. The fact that we've succeeded in our masquerade for so long indicates that."

"But it wasn't perfect, your masquerade," Huber said. "What about the scars?"

Dykeman held up his hand. It was quite without a blemish.

"We had to bring in help quick when this situation developed. There wasn't time for the niceties of long careful surgery. That's why we chose to have our new men masquerade as androids. No one notices them."

"Your first shock troops? It won't be that easy."

"Don't be silly," the medic said impatiently. "You should realize that any sort of attack over interstellar distances is logistically impossible."

He leaned forward and stared pensively at the floor.

"Besides, why go to the bother? In another century, this whole society of yours will be sinking into a quiet decay. You've lost all growth impetus already. And we can use the room much better than you. Even with the land you've destroyed, this Earth

of yours is a jewel in comparison to the other worlds available to us."

"So," Besser said, "we'll just wait until you've sunk into a level of decay and lethargy that will allow us to simply move in and slowly take over the planet as we need it."

"Your race won't be harmed," Dykeman said. "We're no more capable of that kind of extermination than you—less capable, if I remember my human history. Don't you see? That's been my sole mission here, to preserve the status quo. That's why we planned to move against the hunt clubs, why we had to move to keep the knowledge of Touzinsky's Syndrome from becoming widespread. You're the first one who hasn't managed to destroy himself."

"Suicide?" Huber said incredulously. He remembered the window incident.

"A subconscious death wish, maybe. We just plant the proper suggestion and . . . Well, the 'het' field works only for the conscious expression of a suicide impulse."

He smiled bitterly.

"You weren't going to jump last night, of course. But, the near blackout which Besser engineered and my own ap-

parent excitement . . . Well, it planted the suggestion effectively enough. You have no idea how fear of pain and lingering death has dominated your race's psychology since you achieved immortality."

"What makes it so ironic," Besser said, "is that the Syndrome stems from a bio-chemical imbalance produced by the longevity serum, itself. The effects will be widespread in another fifty years. That's when your whole culture starts to fall apart."

"No," Huber sneered, "you aren't capable of wholesale extermination. But you are capable of letting a race die by your inaction. Don't feed me your idealistic drivel."

Dykeman colored and sprang to his feet angrily.

"Damn it," he said, "you brought it on yourself. This was your decision, this life of complete and unending boredom. My people had the same choice, but they preferred the stars to living like fat cows, wallowing in a tight little pasture."

"We can always turn back toward the stars again," Huber said. "We have the planetary drive and later—"

"Correction. You, as an individual, have the drive. That was the girl's doing. Somehow one of her confederates

infiltrated our group here and managed to wreck the ship tonight—"

The thought of a double agent struck Huber as the height of irony, and he began to laugh.

"It's not so funny," Dykeman said. "Her meddling forces us to take measures I'd rather have avoided. We have the city pretty effectively sealed off, but we can't ascertain what damage the knowledge of our mere existence may do. The people outside of the city who know of what's happened here tonight are being dealt with."

"You can't deal with the city," Huber said. "There are too many people here."

"That's what you suppose," Besser said, his lips twisting. "You've provided the agency of your own defeat here, too."

"Shut up, you bloodthirsty cretin," Dykeman said, whirling on the man. "If you hadn't bungled so miserably in allowing him to see the drive and in not discovering the girl's agent in the ship, we wouldn't have to do what we must."

He turned to Huber.

"As for you, Ken, I'll decide what to do with you after I come back."

The medic was pale as he turned.

"What are you going to do?" Huber yelled, struggling with his bonds.

"What can we do?" Dykeman asked. "We'll change the 'het' field a bit. It'll be pretty messy, but no one else will know it was not an accident, a malfunction."

The door closed behind him.

**S**HORTLY thereafter Huber heard the whoosh of jettied air and something, moving fast, went over the house.

"The third ship?" he asked.

"Life craft," Besser said laconically. "The ship's on its way north to destroy your girl friend's machine."

"Machine?" Huber cursed his outburst when he saw the sudden smile on Besser's face.

"I told Dyke you didn't know anything about her."

"North?" Huber said. "That means that the machine you're referring to is the one that's responsible for the radiation that destroyed radio transmission tonight."

"It's a pity you're developing your talents for deduction so late in the game," Besser said.

"You haven't done so well yourself. She's outguessed you at every turn."

"Well, that's all over," Besser said.

"No thanks to your bungling," Huber said.

Besser's face reddened. For the first time Huber began to notice the subtle non-human features about the man: the peculiar flare of the nostrils, the typical pattern to the construction of the ears, the other less noticeable alien differences.

"You have been a little stupid," Huber said.

"Don't press your luck," Besser said angrily, his hand on a heavy bulge in his pocket.

"Dykeman had your number. No wonder he's in charge of this operation instead of you."

Huber knew then that he had touched a raw spot. The color flamed in Besser's face and his eyes were suddenly as cold as death. He moved purposefully over to the couch and looked down.

"This mess wouldn't have happened if he hadn't been so soft with you," Besser said. "If I had my way—"

"You wouldn't have even a foothold. He had the name, all right. Cretin."

Besser's lips tightened and suddenly he raised a hand.

Huber's rocketing knees caught him at the base of the short ribs. The alien stumbled back, gasping.



Huber rolled wildly, trying to get to his feet. He pulled frantically at the bands that encircled his wrists, feeling them cut into his flesh. Besser had stumbled back against a desk, his hands clutching at his middle.

Then he straightened, hate twisting his face into a mindless animal mask. His hand reached almost lovingly for the bulging pocket and a gleaming pistol slid from its concealment. He raised the barrel, his eyes gleaming.

Huber closed his eyes and waited for death.

Then there was a coarse humming sound that seemed to vibrate his teeth at the roots. He smelled the sharp bite of ozone.

Nothing happened to him. Miraculously, he was still alive.

He heard Besser curse softly and he opened his eyes.

Loira was standing on the far side of the desk, her body bathed in a flickering nimbus of yellow light. The low hum was coming from a bright metal case, depending from a strap thrown over one shoulder. She touched the case with a hand and the humming increased in pitch and then ceased.

"This is convenient," Besser said, and raised the pistol.

Before he could fire, a pale violet beam shot from the case at Loira's side, formed itself into a flame-bright sphere and rushed silently toward Besser. The edge touched him and the pistol fell to the floor with a muffled thump.

For seconds a sparkling, vaguely man-shaped outline persisted where he had stood. Then this too faded. Huber felt the faintest warmth on his cheek.

Loira was at his side, her hands plucking at his bonds. His arms came free, and then his legs.

"Where's Dykeman?" she asked.

"The city—Universal Building, I think. . . ."

"And the ship?"

"North—to destroy your machine."

"The projector? Did Dykeman give you any idea of what he planned to do?"

"He said something about the 'het' field."

"I was afraid of that. We've got to find a 'copter and stop him."

"What about your private means of transportation?" Huber gestured at the gleaming case at her side.

"No, this is only a remote control device and detector for the mechanism in the

Hudson Bay area. It controls my projection from the machine. You didn't think I could have survived the blast at the wreck otherwise?"

He reached out, touching the solidity of her flesh.

"You're no projection," he accused.

"Not as you understand it. That doesn't mean I have any material reality when I'm using the machine."

"But—"

"We haven't time for long-winded explanations. Besides, the very math that describes the phenomenon hasn't even been invented yet."

"The machine," he said, "the one their ship is trying to destroy—"

"Yes," she said, "it was the means by which Vic and I and one other were able to come back and contact you."

She paused in indecision. Then she said,

"It's not accurate at all to call it this, but the best description I can give you is that it's a time machine."

## CHAPTER X

"**W**HAT ABOUT the 'het' field?" he demanded as they winged their way across the city. The only aircraft in Dykeman's garage had been one of the clumsy, fuel-heavy

disaster craft such as they had seen at the wreck site. They had taken that.

"I don't know. The field is a very complex thing. There are a number of things he could do."

"They can't cover up their existence with a move like this."

"Yes, they can. If they're brutal enough. You don't know what they're capable of. Nor how far your world has withdrawn from reality."

"But a whole city—a whole test group! What can he do?"

"It makes no difference. This world of yours would forget the worst disaster in a century."

"There," he pointed at the bright shape of the Universal Building spearing the sky. The 'copter swayed and bounced in the grip of thermals as she cut out of the regular traffic lane and dropped down toward the city.

For a moment they hovered over the broad city streets. Far below people were milling about, pressing forward in tight masses. They were all moving along the street in one direction, their bodies pressed tightly together into one almost cohesive mass. The frightening thing, he suddenly realized, was that they

weren't making a sound. He should be able to hear the crowd murmur of such a mass, even above the noise of the helicopter. But there was only the silent motion of the crowd, like close-packed wheat swaying under the rush of a voiceless wind.

The 'copter surged ahead, passing over more and more people, all moving solidly in the same direction. As they dropped even lower, seeking the broad plaza before the Universal Building, he saw their faces. His eyes were filled with the montage of silent mouths, open as if to cry out; of eyes, looking blankly ahead with an idiot stare.

The 'copter grounded on one of the side streets, leading to the Plaza. He dropped from the hatch and saw a group of people moving out of the plaza and toward them.

"Wait a minute," he yelled and moved to intercept the muscular blond man in the lead.

"Ken," Loira yelled. "Don't move too far ahead. I can't protect you if we lose contact."

For an instant he felt a faint dizziness and a sudden heavy depression. It was impossible to go on. Better to quit, to stop trying. Nothing left but . . . yes . . . the only

answer. Death . . . a silent dreamless sleep . . . to die . . .

He clutched at the blond man. In the next instant hands were clawing at his back. The blond man aimed a blow at him, a heavy ring sliding across his cheek. He sank to the pavement, feeling the coldness of the concrete. . . .

Cold . . . like death . . . there was only one sure way . . . the river . . . to sink into its dark cold depths . . . to . . .

And then Loira was beside him, her thin hands striking his face again and again, driving away the blackness.

"He's using the field to stimulate a death impulse," she sobbed. "He's driving them into the river!"

"My God," Huber gasped. "He'll destroy everyone in the city. That's what he meant about everyone thinking it was an accident, a failure of the 'het' field."

He rose to his feet and sprinted toward the plaza. He crossed it quickly, Loira close behind him. The cold eyes of Meintrup's statue looked down on them as he halted outside the door.

"Where's the field apparatus?" he asked.

"Second floor from the top," she said breathlessly. "But he's probably turned off

the induction fields. You'll never reach him."

Huber stared up the side of the towering building. Near the top of the slim needle, he saw a gleaming metal cylinder, poised weightlessly before an open window.

"The lifecraft," he yelled. "He's inside."

He turned and ran back the way he had come. He climbed into the helicopter. Behind him, he heard Loira plead,

"No, Ken! No!"

He switched on the autopilot, keyed the starter and waited as the electric motors whined and the jets caught. Then he punched quick data on the programmer of the autopilot and pulled the throttle. The ship was six feet off the ground when he leaped.

He grabbed her and pulled her up beside one of the buildings, bordering the street. The 'copter soared, twin blades beating the air. It hesitated for a moment as the autopilot took over. Then it plunged up and forward, heading for the top floor of the Universal Building.

He looked up at the alien lifecraft in time to see a section of the gleaming cylinder fold back. For an instant he saw a man's form move from the open window to the life-

craft, stand outlined against the early glow of morning and then—

Then the 'copter hit just above.

The aircraft splintered with the impact, the clumsy fuel tanks collapsing in accordion folds.

For a second nothing happened.

Then one of the tanks erupted with a muffled roar. Liquid flame dripped down to engulf the alien ship and cascade down the side of the building. A second explosion, more violent than the first, rocked the ground and masonry showered the street.

"Look, look," Loira said breathlessly.

The top floors of the Universal Building were a huge torch, jetting white hot flames into the morning skies. And all around them, people were coming out of their drugged state and looking around in bewilderment.

**T**HEY SAT in the Cafe Duval where they had first met. Someone had lowered the glass panels from the metal canopy, cutting off the chill morning air. Through the transparent walls, they could see the blackened warped spire of the Universal Build-

ing, still smouldering. In the first light of the morning, it looked leprous and diseased.

"You've changed," Loira said. "Changed a lot from the frightened man of yesterday who couldn't face the end of his life."

"A lot has happened. There's a great deal I want to ask you—"

"There isn't much time," she said. "Soon their ship will find my machine and—"

"Can't we do something to stop that?"

"No," she said. "Anyway, I'm not really in this world of yours. Less so, perhaps, with each passing minute."

"But—"

"Let me finish. In my world, there are only a few of us, a few humans left. The aliens are quite humane in their own way. They're not monsters, any more than Dykeman was. Just as, centuries ago, we were quite humane to the Amerindians after we robbed them of their land. Only..." Her face became cold and her eyes showed pain.

"Only we left them some dignity. We didn't make useless pets of them."

"There were three of us: myself, Vic and one other whom you've never met. We stole one of their machines, a machine the aliens won't in-

vent for another two centuries. Then we came back here. The one you didn't know managed over the last two years to find one of their bases in Africa, to secrete himself aboard one of their ships. He was the one responsible for the wrecks last night."

"And he died," Huber said softly.

"No, I don't think so. We can't really be killed since we're not truly here, not materially. But there's no room in our history for that crash. He probably ceased to exist at that point—just as Vic did tonight after driving away the third ship with his helicopter."

"But," he protested, "that means you've destroyed yourself."

"Perhaps. I don't know. But in my world, in my past, there was a man named Kenneth Huber. He was one of the first to develop Touzin-sky's Syndrome."

Her hand brushed the case beside her, fingers finding yielding surfaces. The box began to emit low warning buzzes at regular intervals.

"They're getting close," she said. "I don't have much time. About my Kenneth Huber—he was killed in a hunt."

"No, wait, that was another

world." She was speaking rapidly now, waving aside his protests. "But that was a crucial point. Huber was one of the few in this world who could understand the alien drive if he had a chance to see one. We knew one of their groups would be active near the city on the night Huber's test group finished its week. If we could avoid his death, contact him, engineer him into a situation where he could see the drive—"

"But you've solved nothing, except preventing my death," Huber protested.

"That's not true. The one thing this world needs is a challenge. You have two now. The challenge of space flight, and the knowledge that, if you don't use it, you lose your own world as well as the planets by default."

"But the disease . . . That means the end of immortality."

"No," she said, "Dykeman was wrong. There's nothing bad intrinsically about immortality, provided the race is exposed to new stimuli. You have the facilities to find the answer in time to the syndrome. We know that. Why, even you don't have to accept the five-year death sentence Dykeman imposed on you. Perhaps in your time—"

"So it comes back to me. And what I do?"

"Yes. You know about Dykeman's people. You have the secret of their planetary drive. Once you're off the planet, they'll have to give up their goal of walking in quietly and taking over with no trouble at all."

"And the pilot?" he said. "Who'll leave this safe comfortable world to risk his life for something so immeasurably in the future?"

"Immeasurably? With the serum and a cure for the syndrome, you, yourself, might live to my day. There'll be many who'll be willing to risk their lives. But there has to be a first one."

"And?"

"Well, that too is your decision. You're one of the few who isn't afraid of dying. The hunt clubs will give you others."

**F**OR A MOMENT he sat, feeling the quick surge of blood in his temples. The vision of endless distances, new worlds. He felt a sudden hunger he had not realized was there. His hand found hers for a moment and he said, "Have you ever been outside?"

She nodded. "You've never seen such stars," she said.

The signals from the case at her side began to increase in frequency. "Please go now," she said.

"When were you born?" he asked.

"A century from now."

"But what happens to your world—if I decide to fight, I mean?"

"It ceases to exist."

"And you?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. It isn't important."

"That's the hardest part of all."

"You must decide. Perhaps we'll meet someday. Perhaps I may remember all this as a dream."

He turned and started to leave.

"The years pass quickly," he heard her say, "and you have much to do."

The signals of the case blended into a monotonous roar behind him.

"Hurry . . . hurry, if you can, Ken . . . somehow, some way, I'll be waiting . . ."

He paused, wanting a final look at her, a last word.

When he turned, the table was empty.

He walked into the street, his body possessed with something strong and throbbing. He looked up as flight after flight of helicopters etched themselves against the morning skies.

The test group was leaving the city. Before another twenty-five years, before they came again . . . ?

Then he noticed the sidewalk before the cafe.

On the walk he saw scores of the May flies, their graceful bodies crushed by the thoughtless feet of passersby. For a moment he felt a distant poignant regret for the mindless things whose juices stained the concrete.

But the heat of the summer's night was lost in the fresh breezes from the river and the morning was wonderfully cool.

The air was like wine.

No, he thought, wine—good wine—is old.

Like cider. New . . . fresh . . . sweet.



• The next SFA goes on sale July 2! •



## THE FAN-SPACE

Conducted by Archibald Destiny

**T**HE BIGGEST NEWS of any year in science fiction fandom concerns the annual world convention. I've received a news flash about this year's, so here it is without further ado:

The Fifteenth World Science Fiction Convention will be held in the Kings Court Hotel, London, England, over the week end of September 6, 7 and 8, 1957. The committee hereby extends a warm personal invitation to all readers of **SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES**.

The convention committee has booked the entire hotel, which caters expressly for overseas visitors, and there will be ample opportunity for fans to meet in after-session get-togethers, where all manner of scientific (it says here) discussions will rage into the night hours. Attendance so far promises to be strong from America, the Continent

and the Commonwealth—and this year's convention should be the first really international worldcon.

Membership in the World Science Fiction Society, the sponsoring body, is one dollar (quite a bargain—just half the price it's been in recent years!), which should be sent to the secretary, 204 Well-meadow Road, Catford, London S.E. 6, England. Hotel bookings should also be made through the secretary, and it is advised that they be placed early. While the program planned should be one of the best and most interesting yet promoted, the social aspects of the convention are by no means being overlooked.

The above information comes from an official publicity release. I've also seen the first of this year's issues of the *Journal* published by the Society, which is an extremely handsome production



(sent free to all members) giving late news. From it, I gather that prices at the hotel are remarkably low, compared to similar accommodations in the states.

What it adds up to is this: the trip to London isn't exactly cheap, no matter how you look at it; but your expenses once you get there will be only a small fraction of what they'd be at a convention in the United States. The trip itself should be exciting and interesting enough to make it worth the price, and the convention looks, in many ways, like the best ever. I hope to be there—will I see you?



SPEAKING of conventions, the Newyorcon (officially, the Fourteenth World Science Fiction Convention, held in New York in 1956) is past history, but you can still get a copy of the *Newyorcon Memory Book* at \$1.00 a copy. It contains 160 pages of mimeographed material, with printed covers and a special plastic binding. The contents include a fanzine "combozine" and a report on Nycon I (the very first world convention of all, held in 1939, which is ancient history in fandom) written by James Taurasi of *Fantasy*

*Times*, one of the few fans who has been around since the beginning. This book will probably be a collectors' item in a very short time, as only 100 copies were published. Get yours before they are all gone from K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Avenue South, Moorhead, Minnesota.



ONE THING new fans look for anxiously is a fanzine devoted mainly to advertisements of back issues, rare books, other fanzines, etc. For many years a magazine known as *The Kaymar Trader* fulfilled this need, supplying fandom with information pertaining to the buying, selling and trading of material relating to science fiction and fantasy. Then, abruptly, *Kaymar* folded. Most fans, apparently, felt sure another zine would take its place, but time passed and none did. It is with the thought in mind that many other fans are still hoping for a tradezine that Fred Tilton, 37 Eighth Avenue, Haverhill, Massachusetts, has decided to publish a new one.

This magazine, to be known as *The Trading Post*, will be the standard 8½ by 11 inch size, and a monthly. The advertising rates will be 50¢

per page, 25¢ per half-page, and 15¢ per quarter-page; subscription rates will be 10¢ each or three for a quarter. In these days when even fanzine prices have felt the icy breath of inflation, these rates are surprisingly cheap, and you could hardly lose by sending Fred an ad or a sub. Fandom certainly needs such a magazine, and such a project deserves support.

THE "personals" department for this issue is as scrawny as a fan's wallet after his first convention. The following, in fact, is it:

Lucky Rardin, female, 23 years old, and married to a Marine, would like to hear from anyone, anywhere, about anything. Lucky has two small sons, is 5' 5" tall, weighs 128, has brown hair and blue-green eyes, loves reading, drives her own race car and stunt-rides on motorcycles. She'll exchange pictures, and her address is P.O. Box 342, Oak View, California.

Remember, this is essentially your department, and the more material you send me to put in it, the less work I have to do trying to fill it myself. How about it?

APART from conventions and club meetings, fans keep in touch with each other largely through fanzines. The way to find out what fandom is all about is to read fanzines; the way to make a name for yourself in fandom is to contribute to them, or to publish one of your own. If you've never seen one, I'd advise you to send for samples of several.

Don't expect amateur imitations of the professional science fiction magazines; many fanzines use some amateur fiction, but otherwise there is almost no similarity. Don't expect to understand everything in them at first; fans use many esoteric terms which take some getting used to. And don't get too excited if you send a publisher money for a sample and it doesn't arrive for several weeks; most fanzines, necessarily, are published on rather irregular schedules.

The current crop includes a few really outstanding items. I'm sorry I can't go into extensive detail about any single one, but I think I can use my limited space to better advantage by listing as many as possible with capsule descriptions. As follows:

*The Harp Stateside* is a "one-shot" which might better be described as a fan-book than a fanzine. Written by Walt Willis, the punning Irishman who became possibly the most famous fan of all time, it relates the complete story of his trip to the United States in 1952 to attend the Chicago convention. The story itself and Walt's writing style are both completely fascinating. The volume runs to 70 well-mimeographed pages, liberally sprinkled with marvelous illustrations (or "Atomillos") by Arthur Thomson, and bound in semi-stiff covers. It's 35¢ (or two shillings) from Walter Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, and easily worth a lot more—being as long, and at least as worthwhile, as many professionally published books.

In association with Chuck Harris of England, Willis also publishes *Hyphen*, a fanzine that appears infrequently but always evokes cries of delight when it does arrive. The issue I have before me is dated December 1956, but appeared a few months late. The material is mainly humor, by such master as John Berry, Willis himself, James White and Eric Frank Russell. Send

15¢ (or one shilling) to Walt for a copy, and become a dyed-in-the-wool fan automatically.

Ron and Cindy Smith have published the first new issue of *Inside* since it won the "Best Fanzine" award at the Newyorcon (sickness explains the delay). It's as good as ever, this issue containing 40 photo-offset pages of varied material, leading off with a debate on psionics by L. Sprague de Camp, David Mason and John W. Campbell, Jr. (I'd say Mason wins hands down!) Well worth 25¢ (five for \$1) from Ron Smith, Box 356, Times Square Station, New York 36, New York.

A special convention issue of *Etherline* has arrived, but this time the convention in question was an Australian one. Regular issues of *Etherline* contain worthwhile reviews, but otherwise are of limited interest to American fans. Highly impressive, however, is that "Issue No. 79" on the cover! If you want to see what Australian fandom is like, send \$1 for 13 issues to the American agent, J. Ben Stark, 290 Kenyon Avenue, Berkeley 4, California.

And now I must touch just briefly on other recent fanzines:

*Magnitude* is a small photo-

offset magazine published quarterly by Horizons Enterprises, 409 West Lexington Drive, Glendale 3, California; 10¢, six for 50¢. Varied material, with a movie column by Forrest J. Ackerman.

*Mana* is an informal mimeographed 'zine published by Bill Courval, 4215 Cherokee Avenue, San Diego 4, California, has a rather intellectual flavor, and apparently is free for the asking.

*Once in a Blue Moon* is a brand-new product of the Manchester Circle, c/o Dave Cohen, 32 Larch Street, Hightown, Manchester 8, England. Also free to those who display interest. Its policy hasn't completely jelled yet, but it looks good.

*Excelsior* is another newcomer aiming at frequent publication in order to present material while it is fresh. Said material will be of all types, and this looks like an excellent place for the new fan to break in. 15¢, 7 for \$1, from Lee Shaw, 545 Manor Road, Staten Island 14, New York.

*Peon* is an old reliable, always containing top-notch material presented in unsensational but highly readable fashion. 15¢, 8 for \$1, from Charles Lee Riddle, P.O. Box 27, Port Deposit, Maryland.

*Sata Illustrated* has chang-

ed slightly again, reverting to hectograph and growing considerably thicker. 25¢ per copy from Bill Pearson, 4516 East Glenrosa, Phoenix, Arizona.

*Triode* continues as one of the best English magazines; Americans may send \$1 for 7 issues to Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Avenue, Minneapolis 22, Minnesota.

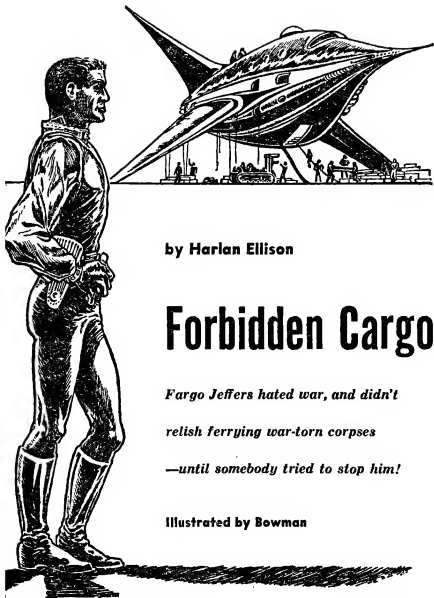
*Twig* is published by Guy E. Terwilleger, 1412 Albright Street, Boise, Idaho, who announces that future issues will be less serious and constructive, more light-hearted and entertaining. 10¢, 6 for 50¢.

*Umbra* is distinguished by an international flavor and a high level of quality. 10¢ each, 3 for 25¢, from John Hitchcock, 300 East University Parkway, Baltimore 18, Maryland.

*Zodiac* is new and slim, but may go places. 10¢, 6 for 50¢, from Larry Sokol, 4131 Lafayette Avenue, Omaha 3, Nebraska.



SO LONG for now, and don't forget to send your fanzines, personals, and questions to Archibald Destiny, c/o Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, New York.



by Harlan Ellison

# Forbidden Cargo

*Fargo Jeffers hated war, and didn't  
relish ferrying war-torn corpses  
—until somebody tried to stop him!*

Illustrated by Bowman

# Forbidden Cargo

by Harlan Ellison

## CHAPTER I

**F**ARGO JEFFERS swung down from the ladder of the *Occasional Sal*, and thumbed the "go-ahead" to the grease-monkeys and pitmen. As he strolled away across the field, the horde of readymen advanced on the ship. In a few minutes the air was blue with torches and the voices of the mechanics.

Fargo Jeffers continued across the field, moving hugely and loosely in his one-piece jumper. He was a big man, in his thick-soled boots,

but there was a bulge of belly that indicated he enjoyed his comforts. He whistled idly as he strolled toward the check-in booth.

The triple suns of Rodopore beat down on the field, casting two shadows behind him, one ahead. The suns were warm and high, and Fargo felt more at ease here than he had anywhere in quite a while. Then he remembered that Rodopore had just come out of a war, and he was a citizen of the conquering planet. Rodopore had lost to Earth, and Fargo was an Earthman. The Rodopites might take most unkindly to him, if the Earth occupation forces hadn't convinced them conquered peace was better than resistance. If they hadn't, things might be rough on Rodopore.

The currents of war had swirled on outward toward Rodopore's former masters, the Valgarian Union. Jeffers had made as much of a point as was possible—considering his occupation and territory—in this war, that he was strictly neutral. The Valgar-

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AS THIS ISSUE goes to press, Harlan Ellison is leaving for Army service. He hopes to continue writing science fiction in spite of his military duties—at least after he finishes basic training. We hope he can too; we want more Ellison stories! Harlan's vast output makes it hard to think of him as a "promising" writer, but as a matter of fact his career has been brief, and we fully expect even greater things to come from him.

Earth war was something he had assiduously avoided. He was a free trader—planet to planet and system to system—and if his mother world wanted to wage war with another interstellar union, that was strictly *their* business. As for Fargo Jeffers, he wanted to ply the inverspace ways without ties, without restraints. War was detrimental to business.

Jeffers slouched against the plasteel-bar front of the check-in booth, slid his I.D. off his wrist and through the slot in the bar.

The checker was a little, cocky-looking tech lieutenant, with a bristle of red moustache and snapping black eyes. "Fargo Jeffers," he read the inscription under fluorolight. "Free trader?"

Jeffers nodded with boredom. "Right. I received a beam from your G.H.Q. requesting all free traders and merchantmen to drop down. An honest credit, the thing said."

The cocky little tech nodded, scrutinized the rest of the legend on the I.D. and raised the bar. He slid the I.D. back to the big man, who put it on, and said, "We've got a gooter waiting. Take you right to G.H.Q. Pass in, mister."

Jeffers saluted sloppily, which seemed to offend the tech, who braced militarily and sneered. He indicated the tri-wheel gooter, and Jeffers tossed his kit into the machine through an open window. "Pleasure meetin' you, soldier. Keep the fires going."

It was obviously ridicule, and the little man took a step forward, his fists clenching against his pants. "At least I know there's a war on," he retorted.

For some strange reason, Fargo felt the need to make light of this ludicrous fighting man and his imbecilic war. "Sure there is," he said. "And I used to stop off here when women and children weren't afraid to come onto the streets after nine o'clock. Keep it up, hero!"

He turned to the gooter, palmed the door open, and had to crouch deeply to get in. As he waved the door shut, the tech lieutenant threw one last insult. "At least I'm not a spaceie chickengut. I fight, not run!"

**T**HE ROBOT CONTROLS of the gooter threw the machine into drive before Fargo Jeffers could answer, and he was a mile down the plasteel ribbon

of road, heading toward the capital city of Getlewall before he realized the sting had been planted. The remark had hurt.

Fargo settled back in the cushions, and considered his position for a moment. Fifteen years in space, and he owned the *Occasional Sal* outright. He had a substantial bank account in various vaults across the galaxies, and had every intention of retiring to some quiet agrarian world when he was too old to draw with the young space-tramps, or a diet of proto-beef and hydroponics no longer suited him.

But right now there was a war going on, and he wanted no part of it. There were enough ways to get killed and planted out here on the Rim, without entering any stupid cross-galaxy battles. So Fargo Jeffers had fluoro-painted the "neutral" band around the nose of the *Occasional Sal*, and refused any and all offers to take sides. The Valgarian Union had tried to hire him out on Iuna IV; the backstabbing Kenmores (who sat both sides of the fence and double-crossed each other when times were tough) had tried to buy him just before the big ambush of the Earth fleet off Nea. He had turned

them down—politely, and with the intention of remaining buddy-buddy on all sides, but firmly.

He had been making the run past Rodopore, on his way to Sassassutii, hoping to find a cargo worth ferrying somewhere, when he had tripped over the beacon.

And there had been five thousand standard reasons why he had landed. The beacon had asked for all *neutral* ships, and that meant him. They wouldn't need a neutral except for neutral work.

He gazed idly out the wraparound window at the countryside. It wasn't pretty.

He remembered Rodopore from before the war; all pink and soft-looking, with bushes that were more moss than leaf, and low-flying insects big as poodle dogs, with clear membrane wings through which you could see the murmuring lights of the three suns, Kio, Lyea and Bel-Bel. Little one-story huts that sprawled across the rolling pink hills of Rodopore; huts that enclosed the greenhouse culture of the planet, where the wiy-grains were raised for export by huge family groups of two hundred people. It was a strange planet, but a pleasant one. Unfortunately, it was



also strategically placed for refueling inverships on their way to the home clusters of the Valgarian Union.

He turned away from the blasted countryside.

The sight of pits and craters and huge mounds of smoking dirt—still smoldering after the capture and bombardment—remained behind his eyes, however. And Fargo Jeffers knew, inside himself, that no matter how ruthless he became, how hard and bitter out there on the Rim, he could never bring himself to this. He knew his stand against the war had been the proper one.

The gooter bounced down the road. (Clever how the Earthmen had avoided hitting this road. Or had they rebuilt it? With the new robomechs, it shouldn't be more than the work of a week or so to spill the road cross-planet.)

Fargo sat forward as they approached a guard station set across the road, a plasteel bar effectively blockading passage. The robot controls bleeped and tinkled off in a complex warning pattern, and before the gooter could hit the bar, it slid smoothly upward, and the gooter passed through.

He saw what was left of the city.

The city was gone. It had been almost completely leveled. The spires were dust. The minarets were ash. Getlewall, gone. Only a rubble heap, with faint spires and minarets of smoke rising, greeted Fargo Jeffers.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly. It was disgusting, and he could hear the inspid voice of the cocky tech lieutenant, saying something like, "Too bad. Fortunes of war, mister."

He wanted to smash out at the men responsible.

Jeffers opened his eyes for a moment, to get one full, heart-wrenching look at what had been a healthy, quiet world. He got his look, and was about to settle back into the darkness of his thoughts, when the lone spire rose up. It had once been the capitol building; what it was now, he had no idea. But the pale blue tower rose up and up in the afternoon light of the three suns.

Fargo Jeffers had only a moment to wonder at the incongruity of the standing tower, amidst the decimated rubble of Getlewall, before the gooter careened around a pile of debris, whipped down a pocked and cratered street, and roared through an open plasteel portal, down a ramp

leading to the building's basement receiving station.

The gooter braked to a neck-snapping halt and idled for a second before clicking off. A com-unit in the control section abruptly came on, and a hollow robotic voice instructed Jeffers to, "Take the tube to your left, please. Commandant Ryley is waiting for you in his office." It snapped off.

Jeffers stepped out of the gooter, which instantly backed up, slamming its own door, and disappeared back up the ramp. He stepped to the sphincter of the rise-tube, palmed it open, and stepped through it.

He was sucked upward, and realized that the tube controls had been pre-set—for what level he had no idea. The tube sucked him upward inexorably, and finally stopped him at the penthouse. He palmed open the sphincter, and stepped off the rise-beam, into the penthouse. It appeared the Earth forces had taken over the entire building, for occupational purposes, but only the penthouse was open to visitors.

And was this where he would meet Commandant Ryley? To find out what he had to do for five thousand standard credits?

**F**AT LARDED on fat. Rolls of fat overflowing a brightly-colored pair of shorts. Fat that hung from jowls and arms. Fat that surrounded little pig eyes of green. Fat that seemed to have a gelatinous life of its own. A voice of fat, emanating from a home of fat.

"Captain Jeffers. Eh? Jeffers, is that it?"

The fat moved forward, extending a blob of fat with five sausage-like appendages. This was Commandant Ryley?

The penthouse was a roof-garden, filled with exotic blossoms, and in that setting the grotesque fat man moved with all the ease of a whale through quicksilver. He slid past Jeffers' outstretched hand, and moved to a large desk, with a specially-built formlounger. The obese hulk flopped into the lounge, which sagged beneath him, for all its special braces, and flipped open a file lying on the cluttered desk.

"Commandant Ryley?"

"Mmm. That's it. Yes, Ryley. Been out here thirty years . . . haven't been home in all that time. Mmm. Think the government knows how sloppy I've gotten in that time? Mmm? No, of course

not. But my reports are adequate. Yes, indeed. More than adequate.

"Jeffers, is it? Ship out on our field, eh? Neutral. How do you find the neutral position, Captain? Untenable? Difficult? Profitable? Mmm?"

The fat man's soliloquy, broken so suddenly by the question, took Jeffers aback for a moment. He fumbled with his words for an instant, then came up with, "I find it healthier than being a Rodopite."

The fat man grinned. Jeffers wished he had not. The fat rolled away, and then settled back. It had been that swift, yet it left Jeffers feeling unhappy, dirty.

"Don't mind the condition of the city, Captain," the commandant deprecated the ruins outside, below and around them. "These Rodos gave us quite a battle before we were able to trim 'em. Mmm, yes. Rugged show, indeed."

Jeffers slumped against the thick bole of a fleshy-leafed yellow plant. He was suddenly very tired from the inverse-space jump, the landing, the gooter ride, and now this despicable occupational officer. "Yeah, I'll bet those farmers and their kids were real bastards at war." He

sneered lopsidedly at Ryley.

Before the Commandant could reply—and he seemed to *want* to reply strongly—the tube opened, and a statuesque blonde wearing only shorts and a halter stepped out. She paused for a moment, staring at Jeffers, then unashamedly walked across the room, her body tight and hard and firm, and plopped herself into the fat lap of the Commandant.

Jeffers' eyes never left her for an instant. She was almost as tall as he, a good six feet of hard, sun-tanned flesh, with brassy hair and eyelashes that were the same shade. Her mouth was full, perhaps *too* full, with too much sensuousness, but her body was hard enough to let anyone know there was a lot of fight there when it was needed.

It seemed to fall to the Commandant to introduce her, and he patted her back with more than fatherly attention as he announced, "Captain Jeffers of the neutral *Occasional Sal*, I'd like you to meet Marla Norcross. A, uh, fellow captain. She has been, mmm, yes, she's been helping me organize Rodopore against the eventuality of a Valgarian counter-attack."

He patted her again, lower,

and added, "Say something nice to the Captain, Marla."

Marla spat.

Ryley laughed lecherously, and slapped the girl again, still lower, while Marla Norcross glowered at Jeffers.

"Mmm-mm! Just a spirited lady, Captain, that's all. Just a bit of spirit."

Marla Norcross jumped off his lap and turned on him sharply. "Well, do I get the assignment, or don't I, Ryley? I've been hanging around here over three months. The *Wallop*'s collecting dust out on your stinkin' field, and I want that trip!"

Commandant Ryley placated her sharply with a meaty paw, and ushered her to silence with the same motion. "No, and yes, Marla dearest, you do and do not get the assignment."

The girl spat again violently, and started to stride back to the tube. Ryley's face blackened with fury, and he slammed the desktop with one gigantic hand. "Stop!" he growled, and the girl halted in mid-step, her tanned face whitening.

**S**HE TURNED, and Jeffers saw stark fear in her blue eyes. Marla Norcross was terribly afraid of Commandant Ryley.

The big spaceman suddenly wished he knew what hold the fat man had over her. It should be interesting.

"Sit down," Ryley said in a quieter voice.

She sat, quickly, sedately. Somehow the quick obedience did not fit her.

"Now, mmm," Ryley took up the conversation. "Are you interested in five thousand standards, Captain?"

"Am I interested in breathing?"

"Mmm. A fine answer, yes. Well, then, would you take on a job—neutral, mind you—that pays that much, for one trip?"

"Depends."

Ryley's fat-swathed eyebrows rose in question.

Jeffers amended. "Depends on whether it's really neutral, what it is, and what you get out of it."

Ryley passed it all off quickly. "Believe me, Captain, it's more a nuisance than anything else. I want you to ferry a cargo of coffins back to Earth for burial, that's all."

Jeffers wasn't certain he had heard properly. He inquired, and the Commandant repeated his statement.

"A great many men died in taking this planet, Captain. I have been ordered to have them flown back to Earth for

proper burial. You will have the honor of carrying them."

"Why me?"

"Mmm. Why you? Simple, Captain. I can't spare a ship, and you were the first neutral through our beam—"

Marla Norcross interrupted with heat. "The hell he was! I was here three months ago, and you've been stalling me every day! Now this louse is here, and you let *him* drag it! It isn't fair—"

She seemed bent on raving longer, but Ryley cast her a withering glance, and she shut up suddenly.

"I intend to make good my promise, Marla dearest. But since the five thousand standards would have to be paid in advance—I wouldn't be callous enough to ask a fine spacer to come all the way back from Earth, just to collect his pay—I want to make certain my cargo of coffins gets all the way back to Earth, and isn't dumped out someplace near a red dwarf. I mean, I'm not crediting either of you fine children with such base motives—taking your government's money, dumping a cargo of dead heroes, and then hitting for the nearest world where you could take on another cargo for even *more* money—but just the same, I'm, mmm, yes,

I'm a cautious man. That's why I'm Commandant out here, don't you see?

"So," he finished smugly, "you'll make the flight *together*."

Marla Norcross reacted first. She came to her feet, her fists clenched tight to her breasts. "Whaddaya mean, *together*! I ain't gonna split no five thousand credits with this slob. An' I was here first!"

Jeffers was slightly more quiet about it, but his reaction was similar. "Uh-uh, Ryley. I make no jumps with a broad on ship. Get yourself another boy." He turned to walk away.

Ryley spat, "Stop, Jeffers," but the big captain merely turned and threw him a lopsided grin.

"That works on women, Ryley, but you've got to do something bigger than that to make me heel."

Ryley pressed a stud on the desktop, and the plants that bordered Fargo Jeffers' path slid aside—to reveal a three-man thread-gun unit. One man held the belt of charges, a second lay flat before the machine (since it was not anchored into the floor as it would be on a battlefield) to keep it from jerking upward at firing, and the third man



sat spread-legged behind it, eyes tight to the sights, fingers ready on the trigger-holes.

Now Fargo knew what hold Ryley had on the girl.

"Well . . ." Jeffers began, moving slowly, ". . . that's a somewhat better argument, Commandant, but not quite . . . good enough!"

**F**ARGO launched himself through the air at the last two words. He was over the muzzle of the ten-thread gun as it fired. The sizzling bundle of threads spat beneath him, barely missing his knees, as he propelled himself onto the gunners. He landed elbows first, catching the firer in the neck. The man dropped backward, legs still spread, as though he had been clubbed. He lay still, and before the man lying down could disentangle himself from the overturned weapon, Fargo had the belt-holder around the throat with one hand. Crack! It took only one full-fisted blow to stretch him beside the firer.

Then the third man was on his feet, and his booted foot was coming down on Fargo's face. The big spaceman rolled away, and grabbed for the boot. He twisted the man's leg, tossing him off balance.

The Commandant's soldier sailed over Fargo Jeffers' head, slid across the smooth floor of the penthouse garden, and brought up short, with a heavy smashing of skull on plasteel, against the wall. He tried to sit up, then rolled back, eyes closed, breathing heavily.

Fargo Jeffers got to his feet, determined to flay the fat off Ryley. As he turned, the Commandant broke unceremoniously into unqualified applause. Jeffers looked around in confusion.

He saw the big, brassy blonde, still standing transfixed where she had been. He saw the radiating blast-lines of the thread shot on the plasteel wall near the balcony door. He saw the obesity that was Commandant Ryley, still applauding.

"Magnificent, mmm! Yes, indeed, you'll do well on this mission, Captain. Now come back, and be sensible, and we'll discuss the terms of this flight. For you see, there will be a return load on Earth, to bring out here—for which another five thousand credits will be paid. That is for you, my dearest Marla.

"So you see, you mustn't fight. Ryley always takes care of his own, yes! You two will fly to Earth with your coffin

cargo, together, to insure each other's good faith, and then when you arrive, Marla, you will receive a fully-loaded ship to bring back here to Rodopore. Isn't that nice?"

Marla Norcross seemed slightly more willing to listen, but still not entirely satisfied. "What about the *Wallop*?"

"We will use it for supply work between the other planets of this system, and pay you rent accordingly. It will be well taken care of, I can assure you."

She thought on that for a moment, then said, "Well, I dunno, it *sounds* good, but I don't know about jumping with him." She jerked her thumb over her bare shoulder at the sweating, deep-breathing bulk of Fargo Jeffers.

Jeffers leaped in with, "Well, listen, baby, it's no picnic-idea scooting around with an amazon like you, either!"

"Amazon! Why you damn lousy—"

"Listen you stupid—"

Commandant Ryley slammed the desktop again. "Stop it. Both of you fools. That's the way it is, so if you want the job, you'll have to take it. Five thousand each."

Fargo Jeffers looked at the beautiful big girl standing

with fists balled on hips, eyes sparkling with anger. He thought of the flight through inerspace alone with her, and abruptly, the five thousand standards wasn't the only reason for going.

They both said, "I'll take it!" at the same moment.

### CHAPTER III

THE OCCUPATION FORCES had left the amusement area intact. Such precision high-level thread-strafig, such precision bombing, to decimate the planet, yet leave the amusement area for their entertainment once they had taken over, was a remarkable thing. Remarkable, and disgusting to Fargo Jeffers, who picked his way over the last pile of debris bordering the area, and stamped off the dust his boots had picked up during his silent stroll from the capitol spire.

Jeffers walked amidst the jostling hordes of soldiers and their pick-up girls, walked between the blaring loud-speakers of the clip joints, walked past the beckoning women and the fast-talking dynamiters with their angles, trying to find a quiet place to have a drink.

The double-thread automatic slapped softly at his



right hip, and he wondered for a moment that the authorities had not taken his weapon from him; civilians with side-arms were a bad thing in occupied territory. But Ryley seemed to be worrying more about getting fat, and tending his flowers, than supervising the occupation. No one had inquired, so he would not volunteer the weapon. There was no telling, out here on the Rim, when he might need the gun.

Jeffers had left Ryley and the girl, after signing the agreement forms with her, and had decided to have a drink before heading back to the field for the night's sleep. The *Occasional Sal* was more comfortable—and lots cheaper—than a flophouse bunk. But a drink would warm his belly for the gooter ride back to the field.

He stopped before a violently violet sign that wormed its way across the front of a slightly-less-seedy-looking saloon. He straightened back his shoulders, rising an inch taller with the loss of stooping. He gripped the handle of his kit with his left hand, and hitched up his gunbelt with the other. Then he straight-armed through the sphincter doors of the saloon.

It was murkier than a space-

whale's gut, and the smoke swirled overhead in an unbrotten blanket. Jeffers caught the glass-glint of a backbar mirror, and eased through the jammed tables and swaying bodies—rubbing together to the blaring groans of a juke set in the ceiling—toward it.

An empty formfit stool down the line drew him, and he slid into it, laying his kit before him on the imitation mahogany bar.

A slim, bearded man with unruly hair—obviously the bartender from his apron and idle glass-washing hand movements—walked over and asked, "Yours?"

Jeffers pursed his lips for a moment, then, "Hi-scotch, and *no* ice. Bring me the juice on the side; I'll pour it myself."

The barkeep seemed to want to protest these orders, which would kill his chances of short-cutting the drink, but one look at the immensity of the spaceman before him convinced him it might be best to follow instructions. He brought the drink as ordered.

Fargo flipped a half-credit ducat on the counter, and said, "Keep it." He poured the seltzer-juice into the hi-scotch with careful action.

The barkeep said, "That's

two credits, mister. You only gave me a half-crown."

Jeffers' eyebrows rose, and he quirked a smile at the seedy barman. "Where I come from, and that's *everywhere*, sonny, this drink runs a quarter-crown at the most. Now you got yourself a nice tip there, so shut up and move down before you get a bad case of missing teeth."

The barkeep moved down.

Jeffers hunched over his drink, keeping an eye on the mirror before him, clouded though it was, and the other on his kit. In occupied territory they would as soon steal your pants as look at you.

He was on his fifth hiscotch when the Sevie came in, and picked him from the rest of the bar-sitters. The Sevie was a shrunken specimen, even for that particularly shrunken race. He was three feet high, with a pointed head, a few apologetic strands of hair hanging down, and a mouth that was all gash and no teeth. The Sevie slid along the stools, finally came to a halt behind Fargo Jeffers. He paused for a moment, then slid a note onto the bar next to Fargo's hand.

The tall spaceman grabbed out, his fist tangling in the Sevie's jacket, just as the little alien tried to make a

breakaway. He held the wriggling little creature in a rock grip, and dragged him up the bar front. Holding him against the imitation mahogany, Jeffers grinned, "Bar mirror. Never forget 'em, handier than hell." Then he unfolded the note. Around him, people were turning to stare.

The note said: *Don't take that flight tomorrow if you want to stay alive to hit another planetfall. Good advice from a friend.*

It was unsigned. Jeffers wadded it, and shoved it into the Sevie's jacket-top. He dragged the little alien closer, and pushed his own blocky face so close to the other's pixie features he could see the double-lidded eyes and three nostrils.

"Listen, spook, you take this back to whoever sent it, and tell him to cram it up his tubes. I'm not even gonna ask you who sent you, that's how little I care. Now get the hell away from me."

Then, throwing the little alien from him with such violence that the Sevie caromed off two tables, he added with annoyance, "A man can't even enjoy a drink without being pestered."

The Sevie was gone in a moment, but when Fargo Jeff-

ers left the bar twenty minutes later, he was "bothered" a great deal more. By eight men with sixteen fists and half a dozen stun-jacks.

They left him lying in the gutter.

When he awoke to the kicking of a patrol officer, his kit was gone, and his automatic was shattered against a wall.

And he felt like the bowels of Hell.

**T**HE TRIPLE SUNS were again warm and high. Jeffers watched the robomechs stacking the coffins, and had another serious qualm about the flight. As if it weren't enough that he was being forced to make a jump with a broad that hated his guts, he had been warned away from the mission not once, but twice—the second time pretty insistently. On top of that he felt like the very blazes after the beating he had taken. Then there was the basic idea of hauling dead men, anyhow.

Jeffers watched them stacking the coffins, and felt his stomach flipping. It was a personal, added bit of conscience, and when it flipped, he knew something was wrong. This time it was flipping for sixty.

The *Occasional Sal* was his only asset. It was more to him than just a ship. The idea of hauling three hundred corpses did not appeal to him. He had grown fond of the *Occasional Sal*; she had served him well. Filling her hold (a hold that had contained bloody meat and smuggled narcotics, slaves and animal dung from which chemicals would be extracted) with dead men seemed sacrilegious. But the government of Earth had paid him five thousand standard credits—already deposited by lightwave transmission in the Bank of Earth, Altair V branch—to dig up these men, ferry them home, and deliver them.

He knew that coffin ships had brought home dead heroes since wars had been known, but still it disquieted him. He was an honor guard, but there was something drastically wrong—or why was everyone trying to tout him off this job? Had the beating the night before been a paid job by Marla Norcross, trying to get ten thousand, instead of merely five? Or was it someone else?

So he watched in worried silence as the plasteel coffins slid up the loading escalator. At the top of the incline, other robomechs tightened

pincers about the coffins, and lowered them one by one to their berths in the lazarette. It was a grisly business, but a buck was still unquestionably a credit. Fargo let his eyes close—feeling the heat of Rodopore's three suns beating down on him, casting glints off the ship, baking the field, warming the coffins and the men inside who could not feel it—fighting the chill that pulsed through him.

The chill was not entirely from the coffin-loading.

Then he saw Marla Norcross coming across the field in a gooter. As he watched, the three-wheeled vehicle careened to a stop beside the *Occasional Sal*, and the girl got out.

She was even better looking than the night before. Her legs were long and tanned, her body tight and proud, and now covered by an abbreviated short-sleeved jump-suit. Her hair was bound back into a golden pony-tail, and her mouth was still nasty and ready to snap at him.

"Welcome aboard the *Occasional Sal*," he greeted her.

She hauled a dufflebag out of the gooter and tossed it on the escalator. She turned half-around, shading her eyes from the violent glare of the three suns. She pointed off

across the field at a squat, homely invership standing in its blast-cradle.

"See that," she said; "that's my boat. The *Walloper*."

He looked at its battered lines with amusement.

She walked over to him, till her body was almost touching him, and her voice lowered just enough to be meaningful but not suggestive. "Mister, I'm leaving that crate here to make some change with you. You foul me up so I don't get back to her with that five C in my kick, and I'll see you get spread out thin as salad dressing from Earth to Artemus VI. Read it clearly?"

Fargo Jeffers slid his cap off his head, swung it to his knees in a cavalier gesture. "Ma'am, your wish is as good as in my pocket. Fear not."

She snorted, and hopped onto the escalator. Fargo watched as her long, tanned legs disappeared into the ship, and he spoke to himself.

"Man, this flight is not gonna be like any other I've ever taken." He said it ever so softly.

When he looked down at the plasteel of the field at his feet, the slip of plas was lying there. He could read it without picking it up.

It was short and unpleasant.

It said: *Take this flight, and you are a dead man. We won't try to help you out again. A friend.*

#### CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST HOUR in normal space was uneventful. They had used chemical fuel, and strap-down had been affected with a minimum of conversation with Marla Norcross. "Keep ya lousy hands on them straps, remember!" "I shoulda strapped you down first. I don't trust you, Jeffers."

Forty thousand miles out, Fargo Jeffers threw in the inverspace mechanisms. The ship plunged forward as though the controls had not grabbed hold, then abruptly shuddered, turned upside-down, its individual atoms and everything on board inverted, switched within the framework of what was not, and—

Then they were plunging through the crazy patchwork quilt of inverspace. Strange colors that had no names, colors within colors, swirled past in clouds and waves of oddness. "Close it down, close it down!" Marla screamed at Jeffers.

He glanced at her, and recognized the traditional air of

inverspace fear. The men who plied the spaceways knew the mind-wrenching torture of staring at that not-space. They knew how men could crack easily from watching it. But they steeled themselves, and the really good, the true spacers, were those who could adjust. The ones who could stare at the ever-changing quilt of inverspace, and remain sane—those were the men who became captains. Fargo Jeffers had done it the hard way, after fifteen years, and he was a captain.

Commandant Ryley had said Marla Norcross was a captain also, and she had pointed to her ship. But as he flicked down the covering shields that blocked off the weird many-colors of inverspace, as Marla Norcross settled back in the acceleration bunk, Fargo knew one thing for certain.

Whatever she was, she was not a spacer.

He was about to say something, when the radex blipped, and three converging ship patterns showed up bright and blue on the white screen. "There's someone..."

Fargo paused before finishing the phrase. It was impossible. The three trails were, indeed, following his own into inverspace. But on pur-

pose? Never. Not possibly.

For the simple reason that no way of tracking a ship into not-space had ever been found. Inverspace warped not only the atoms of solids, it distorted all beams, ruined all communications, fractured all normal light beams, and made the ship in inverspace—a ship alone.

Someone behind them, coming in after them, perhaps. But consciously following? Never.

He watched the blips as they converged and settled down behind.

At the end of ten hours in inverspace, Fargo Jeffers was certain: the impossible was being accomplished. He was being tracked through not-space.

He tried maneuvering. Not too much, for that might throw them off their own pattern, and they might snap out of inverspace inside a planet, or on the surface of a sun, or almost anywhere in the realm of the deep. But enough. It did not help.

Fargo watched the screen steadily, and ignored Marla Norcross's complaints that she wanted to be unstrapped.

"Damn you, lemme loose of these things, willya!" He had moved the palm-open locks of the straps that held her be-

hind the couch, when he had seen the first blip patterns, and she had lain there for ten hours, sometimes sleeping, sometimes yelling, sometimes trying more subtle and winning ways to get Fargo to untie her.

But this was a situation Jeffers knew was strange and deadly. The boys who had rocked him, back in Getlewall, had proved that. So an unknown factor, even as gorgeous a factor as Marla Norcross, could not be let loose.

The blips stayed close, in an arrowhead formation that indicated that when he snapped out, they would be close behind in normal space. Who was on his track? What did they want?

He remembered the note on the thin slip of plas, lying back there on the field. "Take this flight and you are a dead man . . ."

*Well, then, I'm a dead man,* he thought. *But how active can a dead man get?*

He threw the ship out of inverspace, and they hit normal space with an unaccustomed wrench added to the natural gut-wrenching operations of snap-out. A wrenching that came from fast slip-out.

Fargo snapped on the screens aft, and as he focussed

in, the three trackers snapped out, zooming toward him in the eerie emptiness of space. They were three privateers, and he was certain they meant no chit-chat.

Fargo threw the ship into inverspace again.

It was going to be an unpleasant game of tag, through deadly not-space.

**T**HE ONLY THING keeping the three privateers away from the *Occasional Sal* was that in inverspace they were helpless; no one had ever ventured outside the closed universe of a spacer traveling in inverspace, and lived to tell what it was like. The universe of the spacer involved the rearranged "inverted" atoms of the people within the ship. Outside the ship, they would be torn to separate atoms when the ship snapped out.

So the privateers dogged the *Occasional Sal* with unflagging accuracy, and Fargo Jeffers sweated it out with Marla Norcross.

"Open up, woman, or so help me I'll—I'll—"

Even tied to the acceleration couch, she spat at the big spaceman. "Go to hell, mister. I don't talk!"

"What are they after?" Fargo felt a wild desperation

building in him. There was a factor still unknown to him, in this mystery that was actually *completely* unknown. The one pivot point of the entire situation: what were they after? Why had he been dogged to drop the flight? Who were the men in the three privateers? What was this girl's part in it?

But most of all, damn it, *what did they want?*

They had called him a dead man. What was it they wanted in this dead man's cargo?

That was it!

Fargo suddenly realized the answer lay among the coffins. Down in the hold the pivot point lay among death.

He hurried to the ship's galley and prepared three foodballs, enough for a day. He carried them back up to the drive room, and rigged a rack from the ceiling bulkheads—much like a plasma bottle rig—with the sucktubes hanging down near Marla Norcross's mouth. He pointed to her with a shaking finger and warned, "Look, lady, I don't know what your kick is in this, but by now I know you *aren't* a spacer. I knew it when the crazy-quilt threw you. If you'd been out here as long as you pretend, you could have taken the goof-up outside.

"But right now that doesn't mean anything. Those boys back there want something, and since you won't tell me what it is, I've got to find out on my own. So if you want anything, just drag on the tube, doll. Because I'm going to be below decks for a while."

He checked her straps, made certain they were out of her reach and just tight enough. The controlcomp was dead-set for Earth, and without snap-out, there would be no attack, obviously. "If you gotta go," he quipped at the girl, "just hold your breath. If anything happens with our buddies out there," he waved at the radex screen, "you can give a kick to the jolly-button there." He indicated the warning buzzer on the boards near her. "Not that I expect you to help me any, but who knows?"

He went below decks, and began to search.

It was tough work, keying open each plasteel coffin, steeling himself for the sight of the broken body inside, searching for something unnamed.

He worked steadily, using one of the smaller grappling robomechs to re-stack each coffin as he searched it. There was nothing. The hours swam by, as the ship swam through

inverspace, but he could find nothing out of the ordinary.

No coffin contained a billion standards packed as a corpse; no coffin contained the crown jewels of Rodopore; no coffin had engraving in its lid or papers stuffed in a dead man's pocket.

All the coffins contained were dead men. Men with their heads blasted away, and men with their limbs twisted in death, and men whose skins had been yellowed and blued and even ghastly greened by thread blasters. Nothing but the frightful remnants of war. Coffins and coffins and coffins full of remnants. The backwash of battle. The flotsam of hatred and devastation.

Before he realized it, even with the danger that followed the *Occasional Sal*, Fargo Jeffers found himself kneeling against the cool solid side of a coffin, praying.

It was a short prayer, and it made him feel no better, but he was the honor guard for these heroes—and it was about time *someone* did something for him.

He decided to re-search the entire hold again.

It took him six hours.

When he was finished, he was convinced: whoever was after him, was not after anything in this hold—unless





they wanted corpses.

He went back to drive country only when the jolly button screamed danger through the ship.

#### CHAPTER V

**“W**HAT is it? What happ—” And then he saw why Marla Norcross had kicked out at the warning buzzer. Something had changed on

the radex screen. There were now not three ships tracking there—but eight.

Five other ships, bleeps differently shaped, indicating they were of different origin, were homing in toward the *Occasional Sal*.

Fargo Jeffers turned toward Marla Norcross. Up till now she had remained composed, though annoyed and belligerent at being bound. Her face,

like the radex screen, had changed. She was white and terrified.

Now they were being dogged by two forces. Friend? Foe? Passersby? The last was always possible, but Jeffers was quite certain he knew what was happening out there. They were being followed with definite purpose by two different groups.

"Care to tell me what's going on?" he asked.

Her full lips tightened and thinned, but she shook her head negatively. The girl was still holding out.

"Well, then, we'll have to find out another way. The only way." He checked the controlcomp, and ran a few tapes through. A card finally sighed out of the compslot, and Jeffers tapped it against his fingernail. "This is it."

He re-punched their directional, and the *Occasional Sal* turned slightly, headed off its original course. Marla Norcross watched the entire business with the controlcomp, even greater terror building in her eyes, and something else. . . .

"What, what are you doing?"

Jeffers turned to her, and walked to the acceleration couch lined alongside her own. He sat down, and took

his double-thread blaster from its magnogrip. He touched the magnetic holster an instant after the gun was in his hand, as though feeling something vital had been removed. He turned the automatic over in his huge hands, and then slid open the power charge chamber.

A half dozen spaces were empty, and Jeffers reached into a bin under the couch for a small plastic box. Cracking the box with a thumbnail, he extracted gelatin charges in their pill shapes, and inserted them into the empty spaces in the threader.

Marla Norcross watched silently, then repeated her question nervously.

Jeffers slid the threader back into its magnogrip, and lay down on the couch, idly closing his eyes, clasping his hands behind his head.

"Well, Miss Norcross," he said, "there are a helluva lot of queer things happening. And being instinctively the type who hates having shadows on his end," he waved in the direction of the radex and its eight disturbing blips, "I figure to find out what this is all about."

"Since you won't tell me anything, I'll have to ask the ones who seem to know what they're after. That's the boys

who are tailing us out there."

Her voice rose frighteningly, "No! But you don't understand! You can't do this—"

He swung his feet off the couch, slammed them to the deckplates with a bang. "You don't seem to get the drift, kid," he snapped. "I'll do most anything for the almighty credit, but a buck is a buck and getting clobbered is another matter. I want to know what Ryley saddled me with—what I'm toting that's got those eight out there so hot to tail me.

"Since you won't talk, I'll maneuver these creeps to a spot where I can get at *them*. Now you better just settle easy, sis, because we're going to be snapping out in about an hour." Then he added:

"Ever hear of Arsawsum?"

Almost without her controlling ~~is~~, her head shook its ignorance of the place. "It's got the nicest spider-webs you ever wanna see," he grinned, and then stared at her more closely.

"You know, I just noticed. Well, I didn't *just* notice, but now I've got the time to notice: you're a doll, Miss Norcross. Or whatever your name is."

He leaned over and kissed her full and hard on the mouth.

She spat, but it missed him completely. Her aim was shot to hell and gone.

Jeffers settled back for the hour wait till Arsawsum snap-out.

**T**HE PLANET was jungle as deep as the sea. The jungle climbed up and covered the mountains. It climbed up and its blood-red tendrils ate at the sky. It was a riot of colors, but with the main hue of freshly-spilled gore. It always made Jeffers sick, and he had made a point of avoiding the planet, except when he was hard up for tradeables. Then he would stop here briefly, and trade the cannibal natives plasteel trinkets and dolls for their anachronistically intricate and delicate metalwork jewelry.

But beside the jewelry, the jungle and the cannibals, Arsawsum had something else. Something which would help Jeffers solve the mystery of what the trackers were after.

That was why he had selected this planet of all the nearby possibilities the comp had spat out as possible places to complete his plan.

He snapped out and lost four of the eight trackers as he spiraled in over the jungle.

He lost another two by threading through a canyon, and winging out over the desert-land that was a speck amid the jungle.

By the time he set down near the Place of Spiders, in the only way that could keep a ship out of the webs, he had lost all but one of them. And that one was the fifth of the second batch. He leaped from the ship, and raced across the clearing the *Occasional Sal* had burned, positioning himself in a huge blood-red tree, watching for the other ship. It came in over the rioting foliage quickly.

It was snared by the almost-invisible webs instantly.

The ship tore through the first half mile of them, but the sweet, sticky bulk clung, dragged, slowed the ship, which had slowed itself for landing also; and finally, the trailing spaceship hung low to the ground, swinging in a cat's-cradle of spider-webs.

Fargo Jeffers grinned from the tree where he watched. He had been told about these jungle spider-webs, by the natives, the first time he had landed here. They had warned him to come in from the desert, scoot in so low he got grass stains along the spacer's belly, and land *under* the

webs. But a tracking spacer would never know that—so it hung helpless, swaying in a strong, binding cordage of webbing.

Jeffers knew his time was short. Whatever had allowed those ships to track him through inverspace (a thing which still confused and amazed him) obviously was not working in normal space, for he had lost the other seven ships. But time was undeniably short, and he would have to make his pitch fast, before the others found them and attacked.

He dropped from the tree, and sprinted across the clearing, back toward the *Occasional Sal*.

On board, he pressed a stud, and the cover-plates for the planetside air-gooter slid back. He went into the gooter-hold and lowered himself behind the bubble cockpit. Then he pressed another stud, and the gooter came free of the ship, shot upward, headed toward the enmeshed follower, swaying above the *Occasional Sal*.

He anchored the little gooter to the rocket's skin, beside the airlock, with a magno-grapple, and entered the airlock with threader drawn. As the red light on the equalization meter blinked, he turned

the wheel, and let the lock sphincter iris open of its own accord. He crouched back against the wall, beside the sphincter, and as the lock opened wide enough for vision, a searing beam crashed through, charring a pit on the outer airlock door. Whoever was following him was waiting inside there, with threader at the ready.

Fargo Jeffers slid to the floor, and suddenly rolled himself on his elbows, so he could look through the open lock at its bottom.

The man was behind a portable shield, and just the top of his head was showing.

Jeffers did not shoot off the top of that head; with his brain shattered, the man was useless, and Jeffers would be back where he had started. He had to take the man alive. He moved back quickly, before the man could stick his head up to fire again. Then he got an idea.

He pressed the sphincter to close. As it began to iris shut, as a hole just wide enough for his body was left closing in the center, he threw himself at the sphincter, and arched through, landing on the inner spaceship floor, rolling with all his strength, threader extended, at the shield.

**H**E HAD ESTIMATED properly. As the sphincter had begun to close, the man had decided Jeffers was not coming through, that he was going back to his own ship. That moment's hesitation was all Fargo had needed. He hit the shield with his feet, and it fell inward. When the man climbed out from beneath its weight, he was staring down the mouth of the threader in Fargo Jeffers' hand.

"You've been looking for me, haven't you, mister?" Fargo said, quietly but levelly.

The man licked his lips, cast about for his own weapon. The threader lay buried beneath the battered shield. Fargo grabbed the slim, brown-eyed man by his collar, dragged him to his feet. "Now we're gonna have a little talk," he said.

"Or I might decide to toss you outside there, and leave you for the spiders to chew on."

The man's eyes widened at mention of the creatures who had constructed the gigantic webs in this jungle. He began to pale.

"Okay," Fargo said, "let's have it. What are you after?"

"I—I can't tell you," the man squeaked.

Fargo's hand came around

in a flat arc, and cracked soundly off the man's cheekbone. The brown-eyed man slid back against the bulkhead, but before he could fall, Fargo's hand clipped him again, over the nose. Hard. His eyes began to glaze, but Fargo was shaking him, steadily, mercilessly, and finally the mouth opened, and choking sounds came out, till the man was able to say, "O-okay, l-let me alone! I'll tell you as much as they told me."

Fargo let him sit down, and the man ran a hand nervously through his stringy brown hair.

"I was hired along with them other four to follow you, when he saw you already had three on your tail. He figured you was gonna pull a switch, and say you was robbed—"

Fargo cut him, "Who is 'he'?"

The man looked surprised. "Thought you knew. Ryley."

"What?" Fargo felt the deck quiver beneath him, but his amazement was too great to let him worry about deck shakes.

"Yeah, that's right. See, he was gonna swipe it when it was back on Rodopore, but he didn't know which one had it, and there were too many other boys back there that

wanted a cut-in, and Earth was callin' for them coffins. And besides all that, there wasn't no way of tellin' where the thing was till it was inverspace, so he had to get someone to fly it out, and then track it.

"He couldn't use none of Earth's own ships, or hire any of us privateers to take them coffins out, because it would of looked strange, so he had to hire you. His official orders from Earth were to get a neutral trader."

Fargo felt the deck shiver again, and again ignored it; probably just the ship settling in the webbing. "But why the girl? What did she have to do with it?"

The man shook his head and shoulders. "Dunno. She must be Ryley's contact, to keep tabs on you, and make sure we bring it back to him."

"Wait a minute. What's this 'it' thing you keep talking about?"

The man began, "Hell. It's worth more than anything Ryley's ever peddled before out here. If the guy who swiped it from the Valgar experimental labs hadn't been a mercenary to begin with—and wanted to sell it on his own—none of this would of happened.

"But he hid it, and Ryley

had to get it, and hell—you mean you haven't figured it out?"

Fargo became impatient. He gestured with the threader. "Come on, don't stall. What is it you're all after?"

The man opened his mouth to speak, and the ship bucked, and was slammed sidewise. The man was lifted, as Fargo fell back against the closed sphincter and was thrown halfway down the length of the hold. He brought up short against the wall, his neck twisted oddly, as the ship continued to rock and twist and buck.

Fargo scrambled to the man, and saw immediately that the brown eyes would never see again, and the mouth would never tell what the "it" was.

The man's neck was snapped.

**T**HE SHIP shuddered, and a screech of ripping metal assaulted Jeffers' ears. Then a heavy black scythe-like object rammed through the bulkhead, over his head, and began laboriously slitting the side of the ship as though it were a food can. Then Jeffers realized why the ship had quivered before: the spider was coming along its web.

He realized why the ship

had bucked, thrown the informer, and killed him: the spider had grabbed the ship in its claws.

He realized he had to get out of there quickly: the spider was hungry.

Even as he dashed for the sphincter control, and jabbed futilely at the button, realizing the spider had somehow unconsciously severed the connections, the claw edge ripped open the ship, and light from the sky overhead spilled across the interior. Then the hairy, strange, not-at-all-spiderlike face was staring down in, and the antennae were quivering.

Fargo Jeffers threw himself against the wall, and brought up the threader. The blue beams merged and spat at the huge beast. The first blast caromed off the edge of the ripped metal, tearing away a piece. The beast started backwards at the flare.

Fargo continued to punch without success at the sphincter control button. Then the beast lunged downward with its great crablike claw, and Fargo leaped aside as the appendage raked across the metal wall, leaving a bright thin line as though a steel-shearing machine had cut a swathe there. The claw struck the deckplates with a clang,

and Fargo fired wildly at it. Blast after fiery blast struck at the claw, and in a moment the appendage had been charred away.

But the spider still clung to the ship, shaking and rattling it madly. Gouts of blood began to pump greenly from the shattered stump where the claw had been, covering the inside of the ship with blood.

Fargo realized he would have to go out the only way possible. Through the rift in the metal, ripped by the spider, past the face of the spider.

He scrambled along the deck, slick with gore, toward the tear in the metal skin of the ship. The ship had been so jounced and turned by the beast, that the rift was now on an angle that was easily climbed.

Fargo moved up the deck, firing steadily at the spider. Finally, as he approached the beast itself, perched near the slit, he fired directly into the three multi-faceted eyes, one after another, and they popped, popped, popped like light tubes. Then the beast was blind.

Fargo started to emerge, and realized his mistake. The eyes did not count. The antennae *did*. The beast lunged straight at him.

He dove in under it, firing as he did, and the beast fell past him, a high, thin shriek bubbling up from its blasted vitals. It fell into the ship with a crash, and the entire structure, web and all, began to sink toward the ground.

Fargo dashed around the hull, slipping and sliding, pulling himself along by the web's ropelike strands, yet not allowing himself to be stuck fast by the web's honeyed covering.

He hit the gooter at a dead run, piled in, and blasted away as the rocket fell with a crash into the jungle. It exploded high and flaming into the sky as he set the gooter back in its berth.

The other seven ships came streaking over the horizon a minute later, as Fargo Jeffers flung the *Occasional Sal* back up into deep space. It was going to be touch and go trying to evade them from now on.

At least he had learned part of what he wanted to know. But if the group of five ships (now four) had been sent by Ryley, who were the other three, the original three? Who was Marla Norcross? And what was it they were all willing to die to get?

He knew he had to find out quickly. Time was running out for him.



HE HAD SLIPPED Marla Norcross into a spacesuit. He had sealed himself tightly into his own. He had let the air sigh out of the airlock, and stood with her—unprotected against whatever made up the deadly fabric of inverspace—on the skin of the *Occasional Sal*. Her hands were tied behind her, and her eyes were big and frightened behind the helmet's viewslit.

Fargo Jeffers pulled her along behind him, the magnetic clomp-clomp of their boots sliding and lifting and sticking as they walked over and up and down—for there was no up nor any down nor even any over out there—toward the front of the ship. As they approached the heavy pole of an outside viewer's installation, he stopped, and hauled her next to it. A heavy coil of plastik came out of the sphincter pocket of the spacesuit, and in a few moments she was tightly bound to the pole.

Her voice came over the suit speaker, strained, terrified. "What are you . . . what are you d-doing? What are you going to d-do with me?"

Jeffers was not playing games now. He had no time for flip repartee. He made

certain the bonds were secured, and looked at her steadily. Behind him the pattern of white superimposed itself over pink flashes and was gone so quickly it had blended into green and blue before the orange and not-quite-orange were there. Inverspace was a terrifying thing to someone who had never experienced it for long periods.

"I want to know who you are, and what you know about the ships that are still trailing us, and why Ryley sent them after us, and what it is they're after. Will you talk?"

Her head came up stubbornly, and she shut her eyes tight against the madness that inverspace held. She shook her head no.

Jeffers went back to the ship, let himself in, and shut off the visual on the outside pick-ups. Only the audio retained life, and he lay on the acceleration couch, hating what he was doing, for he did not dislike the girl. Somehow, in fact, he respected her.

He listened to the sounds she made: the deep breathing, the sighing, the sobs, the crying, the screams. And finally, the pleading, and the calling out, "All right, all right, *nothing's* — worth — this — come and — get — me — off — here — please!"

He went out and brought her in, shaking and tearful, and wracked by a sickness that was never meant for man or woman. He laid her down on the other bunk, and put her feet up. Her lovely face was washed by lines of dirt where the tears had coursed down to her chin. Her eyes were glazed, and he rubbed her wrists with care. It had been too damned close.

"I—I'm an Earth agent," she said finally. "We knew Ryley was pulling graft out here, but it didn't matter, till we got word that the Valgarian Union had come up with a secret weapon—and that one of our soldiers had stolen it—to market to the highest bidder."

Jeffers was about to ask what the weapon was, but instead, he said: "Prove you're an agent."

She fumbled inside her clothing for a moment, and showed him her almost microscopically tiny badge. He had no means of testing its radiation to see if it was genuine, but it certainly looked right.

"Okay, go on," Fargo directed.

"The soldier," she went on, "got killed, somehow, on the battlefield, and he was stuck in a coffin immediately. The

coffins were stacked and surrounded by an honor guard, in the usual way. So Ryley could not get at them without attracting too much attention, and he had no way of finding out which one it was.

"Because, you see, the soldier had had surgical work done by a renegade doctor on Rodopore, and the weapon was buried in his right arm.

"So Ryley would have had to open every coffin, and open every body. There were too many officers also getting more than their share out there for him to venture it. Then too, the brass on Earth was suspicious of him, which is why I was sent out. I was to bug him into letting me ferry them back, even though we knew his privateers would try to hijack me in space. But he wanted to keep me around for his own amusement, and he had to scout for another pilot. Then you came along. We tried to discourage you from making the flight, figuring if he was desperate enough, he'd let me do the job after all.

"But you wouldn't scare off, and we couldn't tell you the score. There was no way to tell if you were square or would throw in with Ryley."

Fargo stared hard, feeling the back of his head where

the pain still dully throbbed. "So *you* were behind that shampooing I took!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "We had to do it."

"Then what?" he asked.

"Well, when we got out here, the three Earthie ships that have been waiting to escort the shipment, started to follow us. And—"

"Escort! Oh, God, why didn't you dumb clods say something?"

She stared hard at him, damning him for interfering. "Look, mister, we had no way of checking you out, no way of knowing whether you were a genuine neutral or just another Ryley stooge."

She went on, "So when I saw the other five, I knew they were from Ryley, on their way to track us and swipe the cargo."

Fargo slumped. That was another point. "How did they track us through inverspace? That's impossible!"

She smiled maliciously. "We're dumb, eh? What do you think the weapon was the Valgars developed?"

Then it all tied up into one knot for Fargo Jeffers. It was the biggest thing to come out of the war. The weapon that would kill an enemy fleet in inverspace before they knew what had hit them.

And Ryley was going to peddle it to the highest bidder. If Fargo Jeffers couldn't stop him. And there were still four of Ryley's ships against Jeffers' one.

Jeffers re-set the control-comp, spinning the ship end-on through inverspace, toward its new destination, and went below to find the coffin with the weapon hidden inside a traitor's arm.

**"I**s THIS IT?"

She stared at the little block of metal. He had cleaned away the blood, and its metal sides were shiny. "Yes, that's it. What are you going to do?"

Fargo Jeffers sat down on the acceleration bunk. "I'm not sure of part of it, and quite sure of another. I know where we're going—and it isn't Earth, just yet. Later, but not right now. But what to do with this inverspace tracker? That I don't know. I swore I was going to remain neutral.

"Maybe I should give it back to the people who invented it."

She stared wide-eyed. "The Valgars?"

He shook his head. "No, the Rodopites. Maybe *they* can keep it hidden till this war blows away, and then use it

for some good. Maybe I'll turn noble and give it to Mommy Earth. Maybe the Valgars *should* take this thing—I don't know. I'll have to think it over.

"But I do know that there are three hundred coffins below decks, and at least those men deserve decent burial. I'll make the run to Earth, just as I contracted to do.

"But, there's something I've got to do first."

She stared at him enigmatically. He was deep in thought, even as he held the little block tightly. After a moment he said, "The big question now is: is there a way to turn this thing off? It's obviously the blood-trail that's leading our seven buddies back there to us."

She took the box from him, and turned a vernier slightly.

The blips on the screen fell behind.

An hour later they were lost.

Twelve hours later, the *Occasional Sal* homed in on Rodopore. The gooter ride was shorter this time, somehow.

**R**YLEY was bulked huge behind his desk, and the radex was apologizing for the loss of the ship with the cargo of

dead men, and the continued inability of the speaker to track onto them again. It was a lengthy and stammering apology.

Ryley's fleshy face was drawn tightly—as tightly as that beef *could* have been—into a grimace of rage. His meaty fists beat rhythmically at the desktop. His pores oozed sweat, and he commanded, gibbered, raged at the man on the screen to find the *Occasional Sal*.

"—and there's a death warrant out for you if you *don't*!" he spat, and slapped the connection closed.

Fargo Jeffers and the girl stepped out from behind the plants. "You've killed enough good men, Ryley," Fargo said quietly. "And all for this." He held out the tracker. The gadget that would broadcast a signal that would allow any ship to be tracked through inerspace by conventional radex detectors.

Ryley's eyes grew cunning within their caverns of meat. His laugh was a nervous, girl-ish titter, and he made deprecating, placating motions with his hands.

"Well, well, you found it. Good, mmm, yes, good, good. I was hoping you would get it. Our duty to send it to Earth, you, mmm, you know.

Here, let me have it. I'll take charge of it."

He reached out his hands. Fargo placed the box squarely before him on the desk. The fat man moved toward it with all his bulk.

Fargo's first shot took him squarely in the chest. The fat man stared at himself. The charge had plopped into him as a ripe pea plops into a thick soup. No blood oozed from the wrinkled jumper front. He merely stared down at the gigantic curve of his own stomach. "You, mmm, you . . ."

Fargo Jeffers stepped forward and moved the box an inch away from the fat man's seeking hand. "You're the kind of man I ran away from, Ryley. You're the kind of man who doesn't mind the killing, and the burning, and the destroying of a good clean planet like Rodopore. You're like the ones that have gone before you, all through time.

"The ones who get fat, *real* fat, off wars and greed and death. I left Earth because of men like you, Ryley, and now I find I've been pulled in with another one."

Ryley slid forward an inch, his fat balloon fingers touching the tracker box.

Fargo fired a second time.

The shot caught Ryley in

the searching arm. Jeffers drew back a bit as the arm slipped aside, off the desk, useless as a blown-out tube. He stared again silently.

Fargo moved the box away a bit more.

"There it is, Ryley. Was it worth killing a planet to get? Was it worth the men in the hold of my ship, and the cities and the quiet hills of this world? Was it, Ryley?"

"Don't get the idea I'm a poet, Commandant," he spat the word with filth and viciousness. "I'm just a poor slob who doesn't like to see vermin like you bloat on other men's lives. I thought about this all the way back, and I know it means a warrant for me—but damned if I don't think it's worth it."

As Ryley single-mindedly, almost as though it was the only thing in the world, reached for the box, Fargo fired a third time.

The thread took Ryley in the left eye.

The fat man slumped across the desk, dead, and his body covered the box.

Marla Norcross stepped quickly to the desk, shoved aside the dead man, and picked up the box. It was covered with blood from Ryley's head. She stared at it for a long time. Fargo stopped at the

tube, and stared back at her.

She smiled finally, and handed the box to Jeffers.

"Do you think the *Sal* will mind a woman on board a while longer? You're going to need a good mouthpiece on Earth when they find out what happened here. Of course, the fact that you found the tracker and delivered it to them will help a

lot to back up your story. And I'm sure we can find plenty of evidence against Ryley."

He didn't say anything, but the lines of his heavy face softened. He grinned slightly, and they stepped into the tube together.

It was a long flight to Earth, and there was a cargo still on board that needed delivery.



*"You and your short-cuts!"*



## THE READERS' SPACE

**S**AW THE NEW SFA (No. 3) on the stands and I bought it. If I've ever said anything bad about Emsh, I take it back now. That cover was gorgeous.

The stories were all good, especially "Spawn of the Deadly Sea." Read the editorial and saw the reference to Qrrpt's letter, so I turned back to the letters and read it. I agree with you thoroughly, let's see Qrrpt write something as good as one of the John Carter books or something by E. E. Smith (say, any chance of getting a story by him?) (Yes—soon.—LTS). But if I were writing a letter like the one he (she or it) wrote I guess I'd call myself Qrrpt too.

Your idea of having adventure sf in SFA and normal sf in INFINITY (not really normal because it's the best on the market) is terrific, but why not have a third mag featuring fantasy?

All the features are great so keep them all. I like the new one-column pages.—David Orr (address unknown).



My first time to write to any SF magazine, but on reading your April issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES, I simply had to take the old pen and paper out of solitary (as far as fan letters go).

First—I've read most of your previous issues and have always enjoyed them all. I happen to be one of those people who can read a telephone book when I run out of books (Heaven forbid!), in spite of having two jet-propelled little boys (two and three years), so that I can say with complete assurance that your magazine usually is at the top of the list in literary content.

I especially enjoyed "Gulliver Planet" and "Spawn of the

Deadly Sea" because both had a new and quite novel approach to science fiction and that is what makes SF so fascinating to so many people.

Also, I must agree to the reader "Qrrpt" when he says that science fiction should be primarily *science*. He seems to parallel my own thinking quite a bit on that score. As for A. E. Van Vogt—ask Qrrpt if he (or she) has read *World of Null-A* and *Pawns of Null-A* yet and what he thought of them. Personally, I think that VV has H. G. Wells beat all to thunder, even though Wells is considered to be one of the pioneer SF writers.

No one—absolutely no one—can beat Van Vogt!

Will sign off now—keep those fine stories coming, okay?—Lucky Rardin, P.O. Box 342, Oak View, California.

I greatly enjoyed the April issue of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES. Now there is only one writer that I have not seen in your pages, that I would like to. That is Dwight V. Swain. Surely you can get something out of him. (*We will.*—LTS)

Robert E. Gilbert has raised a rather obvious and poignant problem. It is true that *Gone With the Wind* could be classified as a Western, but in the sense that many readers use the phrase "Western," they mean that the story they were reviewing was fast paced, as are most Westerns. But a story couldn't be classified as a Western even though it was fast paced. I think that the way to classify such a story would be to classify it as "fast paced."—Edward Gorman Jr., 119 First Avenue, S. W., Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

At the time of writing this letter I can't think of a word to express how much I like INFINITY and SF ADVENTURES.

The freshness of these two magazines' stories have brought more readers to the field of science fiction than any magazine in a long time. I admit that I read the other magazines but only INFINITY and SF ADVENTURES offer all I want in stories in one magazine.

Bless you for taking Emsh off the white background covers. Tell me something. Why the small letters for INFINITY? (*It's more modern,*



*and gives better visual balance.—LTS)*

Your cover for the first issue of SF ADVENTURES was superb. The cover for the third issue is just as eye catching. I'm proud to add these two magazines to my collection of 1,200 magazines. One question before I close.

How long before both magazines go monthly?—Albert F. A. Marino, 2734 Jefferson Avenue, Baton Rouge 2, Louisiana.

*(We'll go monthly as soon as sales increase just a bit. You can help by recommending us to your friends.—LTS)*



I expect you have had plenty of replies to Qrrpt's letter. Most of them are probably "hot" replies at that. But I shall try to keep cool, calm, and collected. UGH! UGH! UNGOWA BUNDOLO! ME CONAN! ME BARBARIAN! ME KILL!

But before I make a bloody mess out of the whole thing, I may as well say that I'm in the same boat. I like sociological stories. I also like action-adventure stories. I also have the solution, if any author would like to try it. That answer would be to combine the two. Action based on logical

motivations, with a bit of scientific concept thrown in. Sound good? I'd like to see what would come of it. *(How did you like the Budrys last issue, or the Jorgenson in this? Don't they fit the definition?—LTS)*

Emsh did a nice job on the cover, but then he's getting used to it by now. Best interior illo by far was on page 89, and though I can't find anything to the affirmative, I believe it's by Engle. *(Right.—LTS)*

INFINITY, you had Fritz Leiber's re-appearance in the prozines, and now, much to my enjoyment, you bring us back Henry Hasse. "Clansmen of Fear" was excellent.

"Gulliver Planet" by Daniel F. Galouye is the best story I've seen of his. It is second only to his "Satan's Shrine" which I read somewhere, but can't really remember.

"Spawn of the Deadly Sea" is the high-spot thish. Absolutely Silverbergish. Bob does one of the best jobs I've ever seen him do.

That just about winds it up for me. Except for the fact that you didn't have Harlan Ellison thish. And a "many-thanks" to Arch Destiny for the fan-mags.

So until INFINITY, I'll be

seeing you!—Richard Brown, 127 Roberts Street, Pasadena 3, California.



If there is enough call for action-adventure it obviously has its place in imaginative fiction, but the a-a fic has not shown up to now any true originality or literary quality, *by which I mean readability*. It's unfortunate that so many magazines find it necessary to revert to "amusing" fiction with no emotional or intellectual participation necessary or instigated. "Sense of wonder" is an impression provided by an uncritical view (uncomparative) of cosmic—almost religious—fiction. In a way it's the most vicarious, and when you lose it you can be fairly sure you're growing up, an advantage because you can enjoy fiction of the kind mentioned above. Sense of wonder, like beauty, resides in the eye of the beholder. The possessor of it has either poor peripheral vision or severe glaucoma, or is a ten-year-old who never read a science fiction story before his first

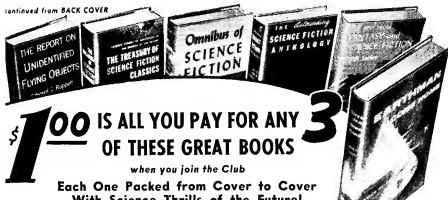
pulp. And this is the person who likes reading "It would be a long time before the men of the dea would draw into the harbor of Vythain." I would be most happy to read an a-a story that is "logical, convincingly motivated, coherent, suspenseful, generally well-balanced and at least somewhat original." How about working on some writers and supplying it yourself? (*That's exactly what we thought we were doing.*—LTS

Keep Emsh while he's doing such good color jobs, and extend all your features about another page if you can. Particularly interesting would be not time-travel or space travel stories but stories in which something basic has been altered; e.g. in the case of Galouye's novel, man's bodily privacy; in "Spawn of the Sea," the land. Keep your blurbs on the table of contents page; the short "biographical" bits. Right now you have the best a-a magazine; even though I have found the last two issues unreadable, the others have plummeted to inconceivable depths, and are unpurchaseable.—Qrrptyuiop 2.



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